



著

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illustration

藤丸

銀河戦記の

《ANTIQUE》

実弾兵器

01

●● 高校生の俺が目覚めたら
宇宙船にいた件

Illustrated by Fujimaru
Produced by OVERLAP

Gibson
PRESENTS.

《ANTIQUE》
OF THE GALACTIC WAR
CHRONICLE

OVERLAP

Me, Her, and the Ballistic Weaponry Antique

Boku to Kanojo to Jitsudan Heiki (Antique)

Arc 1

by Fujimaru

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Illustration

"ANTIQUE" OF THE GALACTIC WAR CHRONICLE



ペラ



ライザ



ミナト



マール



小梅



一条太朗

CHARACTER'S

Chapter 01

“Open all the gunports in the rear!! Set aim... HIGEEEH!!”

Surrounded by monitors on all sides, the center of a room about ten meters in all directions. Various gauges and processing terminals lined up, and within that, Ichijou Tarou had collapsed on the floor as if he were in prayer.

“What I told you to open was... the gunports... who told you to... open my rear...”

Behind Tarou, with her hands locked together, and only her index finger pointed out, the figure of an expressionless woman sitting with one knee up. Tarou noticed a movement in the light, and still on all fours, raised his head to look at the monitors.

“Hey, wait, wait, we’ve opened fire. What the hell’s going on? Do space armies, you know? Does higeeh work as a direction? What’s it supposed to mean? Some sort of code?”

Reflected on all the monitors, hundreds, thousands of pale blue threads of light. By laser propulsion, the antimatter travelling the expanse of space at immense speed was induced into annihilation, causing a burst of heat and light. It twinkled as it left destruction in its path.

“Fufu... Ha Ha Ha!! Just look, overwhelming, is it not? My fleet’s efforts shall bring an end to this war!! The scepter of victory is in our hands! There’s no doubt about it!!”

He closed his eyes, and spread both arms up high. His intoxicated face was colored by the smile of victory.

“Yes. But captain, your sphincter is also nearing its end.”

“With the power I hold... hey, shut it! That’s all your fault, ain’t it!? And that one wasn’t clever at all!!”

Tarou was about to swing his hand down to deliver a retort, but he hurriedly

stopped himself. He was well aware of his own reckless personality, but he was even more aware of what would become of his hand if he tried hitting the body of the metal cyborg. He didn't want to experiment on the specifics of that anytime soon.

"Damn, I'm spittin' in your maintenance oil next I get the chance... what's more, well, what's that. I get the feelin' we've come t' quite a far place. An' look at me. You really think I c'n return to earth?"

With his hand touched to his hip, Tarou stared straight out at the galaxies of stars before him. The woman with her smooth metal body stood behind him, and gave a short, 'who knows'.

"Who knows? How light... but so be it. We're sure to fin' it eventually..."

Said to expand infinitely, the void of space.
In it existed the countless lights of stars.

And within that vast and dark world,
Ichijou Tarou was lost.

"The hell!!?"

An impact rushing across his face. His body bent backwards. Ichijou Tarou found his face pressed against the ground, as he took on the elegant posture of a shrimp. He faintly thought over what had happened to him.

"Now then... fer a hospital, tha's quite an atmosphere its got goin' on."

Tarou recalled how he had been hospitalized for stomach pain the other day, and he fought against the intense pain and washed-out sensation coming over his body as he began to roll against the hard, metallic floor.

"Urgh, it's no good. Humanity ain't ready for that way of movement yet... oh, right, where am I?"

Feeling some nausea, Tarou slowly stood, and turned a circle to take in the vast room that was overflowing with an out-of-place sensation. As far as he could recall, he had at least checked into a very standard hospital, and it didn't have any rooms full metal from the walls to the ceiling.

"Abducted? Aaah, no. The door's wide open. Anyone there~?"

Tarou put his hand to his mouth, and called out. The empty room let his room echo quite nicely, but there wasn't a voice besides his own to respond. He called out twice more in much the same way, but in the end, he gave up, and loitered around the center of the room.

"Hmm, could it be a research lab of sorts? Was my local neighborhood hospital that advanced?"

Wondering why he was talking to himself, Tarou slowly inspected the room's interior. Surrounded by barren milky-white walls, there was nothing else but a few terminals that gave off a pc-esque vibe. It was truly an unnerving space. The ground was filled with blocks around a meter across in all directions, with some space between each. Perhaps to form a path, a white line had been drawn to avoid those squares. Tarou found some lettering near the line, and casually turned his eyes to it.

"Ye~p, can't read at a~ll. It's foreign."

From the shape, it was something close to the latin alphabet, but Tarou couldn't make it out at all. After letting out a single, deep sigh, he started off towards the place he wanted to avoid, if possible.

"Yea~h. I presume I fell outta that thing."

Said Tarou to a lump of metal growing out of the ground. Inside it was a device containing a cavity of human shape. Alongside complex wiring, he saw a number of needle-like protrusions, with faint red traces of red left on them in a shade that would convince anyone it was blood.

"What sort of torture device be this? I don't have such hobbies... Is that an Endohr Corp Type IV? ... wait, what?"

Tarou mused over the words that had come so smoothly out of his mouth, and stopped in his tracks. A company called Endohr Corp— and the other thing— whatever Type IV meant, while it had come from his own mouth, he had absolutely no recollection of it whatsoever.

"The hell? How scary."

Holding his shaking body, he took a step back. Its trigger was unidentified, but at that moment, a light vibration shook the room. The floor slowly began to

move.

“Oh stop right there. You see, I hate these sorts of developments, you know...”

The block units in the floor rose up one after the next. And those dozens of units, differing not from Tarou’s expectations, were fashioned with the same apparatus as the one before his eyes. Tarou gazed over them, as they leisurely float up. But what he didn’t anticipate wasn’t that he found them empty, but that...

“So it’s the skeletons in the closet. No, can’t laugh this one off...”

It was likely the fact, that within all of them was nothing but human bones.

... “COLD SLEEP SYSTEM, THAWING COMPLETE” ...

A synthetic sound rung out from somewhere in the room. It caused Tarou’s body to jerk.

“Eh, ah, what? So that’s how it is? Was that the kind of guy I was? With that incurable illness thing?”

... “CONVALESCENCE SURVIVAL RATE: 0.0002374” ...

“... Oy, oy, aren’t you failing a bit too much there?”

... “DECEASED: 4211” ...

“Four thousand... hey, wait a second there. That’s—”

... “IN PROCESS: NONE” ...

“Yes, please wait a right there. See, look. I just want to calculate this out here.”

... “SURVIVORS” ...

“Wait.”

... “1” ...

“... Whoohoo, how lucky~... as if I could rejoice!!? Someone!!? Anyone there!!?”

Distraught by the incomprehensible situation, Tarou found himself most

surprised by how calm he was. Even so, his heart was hammering, his legs were shaking, and his body wouldn't move as he willed it. Collapsing with tangled legs, he began to crawl his way to the exit.

"Hey, doc!! Someone!! Anyone!!?"

As if being chased by something, Tarou made his way out, and found himself racing down a hallway of the same construction as the room. Along the way, he found several things that looked like doors, but he didn't know how to open them. They didn't have doorknobs, and he didn't see anything like sensors on them.

"Oy!! Dammit, is there really no one here? Just where am I... wait, huh?"

At the end of the long corridor. Arriving at a conspicuously larger door, Tarou saw a gap in the middle of its sliding frame. After calling out a few times to whomever may be beyond it, he thrust both his hands into that gap.

"One two, nggggggggggh!!"

The door that iron-looking door was heavy, and Tarou put his feet against the wall, and pushed with all his might. Along the way, the thought of turning back, and playing with the terminals had come to mind, but if possible, he didn't want to return there.

"God dammit, move!!"

Still questioning himself over why he was so serious about opening it, he felt some relief as he felt the lump of iron finally start to move.

"Fhah... well then, pardon... me...?"

What Tarou stepped foot in was a room of the same construction. But there was one large point that differed.

"What's... this..."

On the side opposite the door, there was a giant glass window in place of a wall. In a daze, Tarou staggered towards it, observing his own figure reflected back at him, as he drew closer and closer.

"... Space?"

What extended before him was an infinite expanse of stars. That vivid array of lights was something he definitely would never be able to see from earth, and Tarou momentarily forgot his situation as he looked out over it. He had no knowledge of constellations, but he didn't think such a thing was necessary to take in the twinkling lights, or to find them beautiful.

"Halfway through, I was hoping I was getting punk'd..."

... "MESSAGE REPLAY, STANDARD YEAR 1428 11 05" ...

A sudden voice from behind. Tarou turning in surprise, but the room was as empty as ever. The unfamiliar term of standard year sent a shiver down his spine, but with the thought that the message was something like an answering machine, he waited for its continuation.

... "Testing, testing. Regular report. 14281105. Nothing out of the ordinary."

Unlike the synthetic sounds from before, it was a voice that clearly belonged to a man.

"No, this situation is far, far from ordinary."

He didn't even know where the voice was coming from, but Tarou muttered to himself as he headed for the center of the room.

... "Interstellar travel going exceedingly smoothly. No problems with the ship or cargo." ...

"No, I'm telling you this ain't smooth. Especially the cargo part... and wait, for reals? This is a spaceship? Uuum, just how many years have I been out? This is the future, dude; the future. Did they develop the car-shaped robot yet?"

... "Henceforth, all crew members will enter a cold sleep. The next report will be in five years' time." ...

"Yes, yes. Nighty night... OOOOOOOYY!!!!"

... "That is all. Ulster Wayne, tuning out." ...

"W-wait a second. Eh, what? What did he just say? All the crew? Could it possibly be that he just said all crew members?"

Tarou panicked some as he paced back and forth in the room. Naturally, there

was no response.

“All the crew in... cold sleep? No, no, no. I mean, doesn't that mean...”

Tarou continued muttering to himself, but even the words coming out his mouth didn't reach his own ears. He didn't know what he was saying. Because in his head, the first words he had heard from the synthetic voice were echoing in his head.

... “SURVIVORS: 1. SURVIVORS: 1.” ...

Chapter 02

“Thank you for tunin’ in. You’re listenin’ to pitiful Tarou-chan who just woke up to absolute hopelessness and despair. Maybe I should just go ‘n die, haha.”

Tarou raised his hands into a victory pose. He knew he should’ve understood there wasn’t a retort coming his way, but perhaps he hoped for it somewhere in his heart. Feelings emptiness from the empty space, he lowered his arms.

“No at the very least, I want to go off after losin’ my virginity... I ain’t a virgin!!... yeah, I’m getting hungry. Wonder if there’s anythin’ around.”

Click and clack, he walked across the cold metal floor. For now, he tried to motivate himself to explore, but that was a hard task. There were only two rooms he could enter, after all.

“He said the next report’ll be in five years, right? It really depends on how many ‘ears it’s been since then, but at most, I’ll have to wait a full five? With some luck, it may even be tomorrow? No, no, ain’t happenin’. But will they come lookin’ for us if we don’t get in contact? I wonder. No clue. Why was I blasted into space in the first place?”

Tarou mumbled to himself as he entered the room he had first woken up in. Trying hard as he could not to look at the line of corpses, he went towards the display that looked to be a PC monitor. The bodies in the corners of his eyes brought about his nausea, but he ignored it to the best of his ability.

“... Where’s the switch supposed to be?”

What you might find in a somewhat stylish bar, a slender and round table. And on top of it was the display. Tarou busily moved around it as he searched out an electricity switch, but there wasn’t a trace of anything like that.

“... You’re wrong, okay!! It’s not like I think that even if I start it up, it’ll be in words I can’t read, so there’s no point, alright!!”

After Tarou angrily shook his back once, he finally hung his head in loneliness.

“Dammit, aren’t I totally screwed?”

It hadn’t actually been that long since he woke up, but he felt the despair was already going to overtake him. He approached the mechanism his body had likely been stuffed into, and extended a hand towards it.

“Type IV ain’t a complete cold freeze. It’s supposed to inject nutrients in periodically. Oral intake should work fine... unlock... if I set it to manual... ‘kay, the injection point’s... no, that’s wrong. It’s over here, is it? Damn! Why can I do these sorts of things!?”

The knowledge he shouldn’t have known created a sense of discomfort he could equate to no other, and caused his body to shake. But his hands naturally proceeded to their next motions without a moment’s hesitation, and his head was filling with the knowledge pertaining to the device before him. His brisk movements disassembled the device before he knew it, and changed the autonomous control mechanism of the nutrient supplying device to manual control.

“For a handle... that’ll serve fine. Even if it don’t look too nice, who cares? I’m the only one here. Now then, how’s it to the taste?”

When he turned the handle, a red liquid started flowing soundlessly from the tip of the needle. Tarou’s face twisted with disgust, as he used his finger to bring some to his mouth.

“Whooh, the taste’s the worst. The hell’s this. Yeah, that’s right. If I had to compare it to something, it’d be something like sugared up iron... I should really be honest with myself here. This is the taste of blood, ain’t it.”

With fed-up bearing, Tarou muttered to himself, before he pinched his nose, and tried to down some. He turned his head as if to drink water directly from a tap.

“Uwoooooaaah!! Bah, ptooeey, hell, as if I could drink something like that!! I ain’t a vampire!!”

After grandiosely expelling the contents of his mouth, he went towards the device, and began shouting at it.

“Hah...but I’m going to end up drinkin’ it in the end, aren’t I. I’ll try again when

I'm so hungry I might die. What else do I need... for now, just oxygen and water, I guess. I don't know anyone from NASA, I tells ya'... could I collect the condensation off these freezing devices here? But if the moisture disappears from the air, I'm done for... air conditioning..."

He continued a subdued murmur as he turned his head in circles. When he noticed a duct-like mesh on the ceiling, he climbed up onto the cold sleep equipment to put his face to it.

"It... won't come off. Of course. It'd be dangerous if it fell on someone... so this's the screw fixing it. Okay, 's long as I have a wrench... like hell I have one!! And what is this anyways? I've never seen a seven-sided sided screw head hole before!!"

Tarou jumped down from the equipment, took a piece of metal in hand, and tossed it aside. Telling himself to give it up already, he lay down on the spot. The reality that didn't have a sense of reality had him begin to question why he was even trying.

"I'm sure when tomorrow comes around, help'll come... that's right. No doubt about it."

His body lost to the washed-out feeling coming over him, and still on his back, he extended his hand to the machinery. He opened up the handle he'd constructed before, and pricked his finger against a spot in the human molding right around the neck area.

"Wow, amazing. As I thought, the extended sleep drugs... really... work..."

Tired out over thinking through his incomprehensible situation, without finishing his sentence to its end, he fell unconscious.

He felt sick.

Along with a strong light-headedness, he woke up the stress accompanying it.

"My body is... aaah, guh!!"

He tried to stand as he was, but the pain he felt on his joints made his movements into a crude imitation of a hornworm, so he decided to stop.

"Seriously, how long was I out this time..."

Enduring the pain, Tarou reached out towards the freezing apparatus. From the open valve, the nutrient injection was still flowing out. The analog gauge that indicated how much it still contained let him surmise he had been sleeping a full two days.

“Oh, I really shouldn’t fiddle around with these things too much. If I took a bit more medicine, I may have starved in my sleep... can’t laugh about that one.”

Rubbing off the ‘sleep’ that had hardened around his eyes, he tried putting the flowing nutrients to his mouth again. The sheer raw taste caused him to spit it up two or three times, but by that time, the inside of his mouth had been largely numbed. He somehow managed to flow it into his stomach, before lying down for a while, to rest his body.

“Hah... they’re not coming, are they. It’s a place we can’t get through unless we’re in cold sleep after all. ‘Course it’s going to take a long time.”

He had a slight bit of hope, but as that faded away, Tarou’s mouth turned sour. Reaching out a finger, he began to use the nutrient fluid to write letters on the ground.

“Oh god, at least rid me of my virginity before I come into your embrace. Ichijou Tarou’s final words... ah, maybe I should make it all seasonal poem like. Huh, was there something like that? No, I’m sure there’s a season of virgins. Got to be spring.”

He continued his murmuring to stave off the loneliness.

“Well not that it matters. Even if I die here, it’s not like anyone’s going to read... read?”

He looked at the nutrient fluid lettering with a hollow expression, but there, his movements came to a sudden stop.

“The hell? Eh? Huh? I’m writing in Japanese, aren’t I? Huh?”

He had been writing it without the slightest inhibitions, yet he found he couldn’t even read his own handwriting. It wasn’t a physical issue such as the ground being too dirty, he couldn’t understand the meaning of any of the lettering.

“Oh Jesus... has it finally started to infect my mind?”

Under immense stress, he’ heard that certain somethings wouldn’t remain in one’s memories. Rather than experiencing it, he concluded he was too weakened, and he held his hurting body to stand. Because even when he wasn’t doing anything, he felt he was drifting further and further away.

“So let’s just put in a bit more effort. There’re people who’ve found help driftin’ lost through the Pacific Ocean. Space is more ‘r less the same. Yeah. That’s right.”

Tarou found a bit of hope in his words, and beside the device he was probably in at one point... he stood before a device that still had its skeletal resident in place. He put his hands together, and prayed a bit, before stripping off some usable parts.

“So who cares if it’s a seven sided hole. Just jam something into it well enough, and it’ll turn.”

He took out a few of the frame pieced big enough to fit in his hands, to see if there was anything rightly sized to fit into the screw of the duct. Determining a slightly largish L bracket looked usable enough, he used the other heavy looking metal parts in place of a hammer to shape it up.

“God dammit. What firmness... what’s it made of? It isn’t Iron? Titanium? What?”

No matter how hard he tried to hammer it, he couldn’t give it the slightest of scratched. Abandoning the thought of using spare parts to undo the screws, he began to extract some relatively long parts.

“Even if I don’t have the right tools, it’s been made to be taken apart. I thought over what breakin’ it would cost, but... I’ll have to amend that. My life’s on the line, so let’s get right to it.”

After skillfully disassembling the device, Tarou climbed up to the duct again, and the time, he began shoving parts into the holes of the mesh. Failing a number of times, he managed to fix an L piece to the grate, and he wound a wire around the other side of it.

“Tereretetereeee~. The Anmitt Company’s specially made Strength Fiber~. The

amount carbon fiber can pull is twenty times that of steel. If you think you can snap it, just you try.”

This time, Tarou wrapped the other side of the wire around the cold sleep device he had been using. After confirming it was firmly fastened, he pulled a red lever in the back of the device without hesitation. A small tremor immediately fell upon the room, and the machine slowly began its descent back into the floor.

“It’s all yours. Use those hydraulics or something or whatever you’ve got. Onwards! Full throttle!!”

He put his hands together in prayer.
The descending device soon went through the excess, and began putting tension on the wire...

“Sachertorte!!?”

Something rapidly passed in front of his eyes.
Whatever it was, it tore off a good chunk of Tarou’s bangs, before it bounced off the ground with a sharp clatter, and disappeared off somewhere. Following that, an immense destructive sound rang out as the duct’s mesh dropped.

“... T-that was dangerous... I’ve got to be more careful next time. That was no different from a speeding bullet. Really hope there isn’t a next time, though.”

As Tarou looked at the lethal screw that had lost its momentum as it rolled along the ground, he rubbed his chest in relief, as he breathed out a sigh. After waiting for the beating of his heart to settle down, he pulled up the raise lever in the device with a slender wire he’d wrapped around beforehand.

“Oh it’s a bit of a mini elevator... up we go. Now then, now then, where does this connect, I wonder.”

Tarou rose up with the rising device. Approaching the dark hole above him, he held onto his anxiety and hopes as he breathed out his biggest sigh yet.

Chapter 03

“Uwooah, can’t see a thin’... turn back ‘f it looks like I’ll get lost.”

Tarou had cast his body into a narrow pipe likely meant as an air duct. He groped around to feel ahead, as he carefully crawled his legs forward.

“I ain’t frickin’ scared, dammit... but even ‘f I go down ‘ere, ‘f the exit’s the same as the entrance, then how ‘m I supposed to get out? Can’t force through from up ‘ere.”

In complete darkness, Tarou clumsily crept forward. Even he didn’t know why he was doing such a thing, but for now, he could only rely on the mysterious info in his head.

“Is this that sleep-learnin’ thing? Think ‘f et like that, and I can’t say it’s impossible, but that’s a bit much... ‘s the future after all, so ‘s possible that field’s become somethin’ amazin’.”

For the uncanny information in his mind, he thought up a setting where he could accept it, for now. It was evident that it would be useless, no matter how much he thought over it here, and for now, he had determined it would be fine to write it off like that.

“Ah, that was close. Branches down. ‘f I fell, I coulda died there. Gotta be careful.”

Rather than a fork leading downwards, it was more of a hole. Stroking the goosebumps on his arm that had missed its footing, he continued ahead. Some fleeting glances behind showed the light flowing in the room he had been in before growing further and further away.

“... Hmm, tinnitus? Nah, that’s not it. What’s this sound?”

The constant sound of wind flowing through the duct. A sound with a clearly different nature could be picked up through his strained ears. After looking back one more, he resolved himself, and started off in the direction of the sound.

Meaning, he moved his legs deeper into the depths.

“Ah, it’s dark. It’s narrow. It’s scary. Damn, what am I even doing.”

Tarou endured the unease boiling up, continuing on. At present, he couldn’t tell how much distance he’d gained, but the feeling the sound wasn’t as distant as it had been was certain. Perhaps a baby’s crawl would have outpaced him.

“Huh? A dead end... or not. There’s a right... and a left... oh my? Oh my oh my oh my?”

Touching the wall, he felt a path in both directions. He did hesitate a moment on which was to turn, but the faint light reflected on his eyes eliminated his choice of options.

“I’m beggin’ ya. AC control room, or the nutrient supply storage would be nice too. If possible, somewhere you can send an SOS... doubt I’d know how ta use it, so maybe not.”

Letting his heart be deceived by his seething expectations, Tarou swiftly moved his aching knees. The source of the light was a room from below, and the fact there wasn’t a lid made him clench his fist in triumph.

“Kinda hoping here. ‘f it’s like this, I can get back without a rope... sorry, comin’ right in~.”

As he had already long since defined himself as cold and alone, he didn’t hesitate to let his body land on some sort of device below. Unravelling his legs, that had become stiffened in an unnatural position, he stood, and turned his eyes to the large machine right before his eyes.

“Whooooa... don’t really get it, but amazin’. What’s this? Wha’s it suppose to be?”

Tarou continued looking up at it as he approached the mass of machinery. The height was likely somewhere around twenty meters. At its center, a spherical metal, with irregular cables extending from it. Those wires connected to a number of rectangular devices. They were all fastened to a pillar that spanned past the floor and ceiling, and at times, the lamps attached to the apparatus faces would flicker. In Tarou’s memory, the closest shape that came to mind was the core of a nuclear reactor, but of course, the probability this

was something like that was exceedingly low, and besides the fact that it was some sort of device, Tarou wasn't able to understand anything from it. All that was apparent to him was that the monitor fastened to the front was likely the operating terminal.

"That one's gotta be beyond me... way to far from my level 'f understandin'."

Without the slightest consideration, he rejected the idea of trying to manipulate the large mechanism, and turned over to the smaller device he had landed on to enter the room.

"Yea~h, too naïve was I. Was expectin' something from that sleep learnin', but guess it ain't so convenient.... Huh, oh look, a button."

Standing in front of the smaller device, he looked at the correspondent monitor directly to its side. There, he discovered a big red button sticking out of it. As he had assumed from the cold sleep chamber that he wouldn't find anything analogue, trifling as it was, he received a light shock.

"Push it, and that large machine over there ain't gonna explode, right... don't think they make systems that go to hell at the push of a single button these days. Ah, I'm not shakin' you know? I'm not shakin'."

It was important, so he said it twice, as he pressed his shaking finger against the button. A somewhat archaic 'PiPo' accompanied the lighting of the screen, as a green line of letters was displayed on the screen.

(TL: PiPo is the startup sound of the PC-9801

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HeQvDMP48Ak>. First sound in this clip)

"So these sorts of things never change. Not the daftest idea what it says, but... aaaAAh!!"

His surprise made him let out a voice great enough to surprise even himself. Of the countless options listed on the screen. He found the 'Japanese' option.

"W-what should I do? Where's the... mouse... no I can do without. At the very least a keyboard or something... damn, which is it? How do I control it?"

In his impatience, Tarou began groping around the screen. After pounding

strongly against his chest to calm himself down, he carefully observed the small device.

“... Dammit!! There ain’t anythin’! Just what the hell is this? Sound recognition? Ah, no. It’s possible it’s controlled directly through brainwaves... I do believe they experimented on that in the 21st century.”

Clicking his tongue at the fact he couldn’t find any UI, he found himself pushing his thoughts forward with the notion of, ‘no way in bleedin’ hell I’m gonna give up here’. And suddenly recalling something, he extended a hand in doubt.

“... It’s a touchscreen. Am I an idiot?”

Thinking back on his prior panic, Tarou’s face turned a little red. After deleting that scene from his mind, and clicking empty recycle bin, he scrolled through the complicated commands, and gazed fixatedly at the array of unknown languages.

“... Whazatt!!?”

Without any forewarning, a part of the device opened like a door, and Tarou raised a scream at the sphere that rolled out.

“No, as expected, I wasn’t expectin’ that one. What’s this? Totes terrifying.”

He took a few steps back from the mass. But that lump of metal rolled as if to follow him, and continued its approach. Tarou ran, the sphere closed the distance.

“OK, got it. For now, let’s calm down, baby. Some important guy said you can understand most things if you talk them out. Then his wife found out about his cheating, and he was stabbed. HAHAHA!!”

Driven against the wall, Tarou continued letting out words from an indescribably fear. But caring not of his plight, the sphere approached him, a red light on it flickering.

“TH•EQUICK•BRO•WNFOX•JUMPED”

The sphere suddenly let out a voice. To what sounded like it belonged to a woman, Tarou quickly shrunk his body, before raising his face as if to see if it

was safe.

“Over the lazy dog... wait, the hell?”

Silence fell. Tarou thought over whether it was some sort of code, lamenting his careless remark at the end.

“THIS ▪ WAY THIS ▪ WAY”

Against his expectations, the sphere let out some awkward Japanese before rolling its way to the giant machine. Taken aback as he was, Tarou timidly started off in that direction. On top of a lack of the slightest understanding of his situation, he felt considerable dread, but from the joy that came from something finally reacting to an action he had taken, he was enveloped in a strange sense of delight.

“Yes, yes, I’ll be there right away, my little Koume-chan. Your big brother’s a little scared, so he doesn’t really want to go that way, though.”

He had given the mechanical sphere such a name, as it reminded him of the pith of a dried plum. He stopped his feet a little bit away from where the sphere had stopped rolling.

“Um, is there somethin’ there? I can’t see a thing... wait, you’re stuck on a cable! Though you look quite high tech, you’re a bit off, aren’t ‘ya!”

Tarou stuck in a self-retort as he reached a hand to the sphere in a life-or-death struggle to get over a cable. Surprised it was lighter than he thought, he ferried it to the other side.

“Thank You, sir.”

“Why English!? What’s more, that sounded ridiculously fluent!?”

(TL: As you may surmise, the line was in English.)

When her words were so broken if it came to Japanese, Tarou felt a strange disconsolation.

“Is it remote controlled? You’re watchin’ from somewhere, ain’t you? A moniter ‘r somethin’... where!! ... Yeah, no, thought not. Wait, is this for reals?”

Agilely turning in circles by himself, and showing off suspicious behavior, Tarou headed for the sphere’s destination, and stopped in his tracks.

“That’s a Type V all right. What’s more, it’s been negatively modified... what’s that? It’s rigged backwards. Is it supposed to suck nutrients from me, and send it into that huge-ass machine over there?”

What was there was a machine of the same shape as the ones cold sleep ones in the previous room, and a device with a human-shaped intent within. Tarou swiftly understood its construction from the strange knowledge in his head, but from that knowledge, he confirmed several things that definitely weren’t supposed to be there. The most blatant ones among them was a cable connecting it to a large nuclear-reactor-like apparatus.

“I don’t want to be sittin’ in that... but by this development, I’m definitely gonna end up in it, aren’t I... let’s be blunt here. The cold sleep success rate of this ship is way too low, man? Even if it’s gotten a new version, personally, I don’t think it’s supposed to change so suddenly, you know.”

In regards to the failed cold sleep pods, he knew it was likely due to some sort of accident. In the first place, there’s no way a device with such a low success rate would ever be put to practical use, and the knowledge in his head supported that. But ignoring the reason, and strapping into the device wasn’t such a simple thing to accept.

“Ge • tin ge • tin.”

That sphere rotating round and round on the spot to urge him on.

“Even if ‘ya tell me to get into that... ah, whatever. Got it, ‘right. It’s that. If somethin’ happens to me, Koume, you’re gonna be takin’ responsibility.”

Tarou decided to bet on the humanity of the future people he’d yet to lay eyes on, and slowly sunk his body into the human-shaped cavity. A device created with the pretense of human use could have been made too dangerous to the pilot, or so he told himself.

“Yes, this good enough for ‘ya? Wah, aAAah!! It pricked me, yay, her it comes!!”

The pain he felt in his neck twisted his body. Tarou knew its identity was the medication that induced him to sleep, so he decided to quietly close his eyes. While he truly fell into a deep sleep, the whole process only took a mere two

minutes.

“... Yes, good morning. I’m Ichijou Teirow.”

Opening his eyes with a fuzzy hear, Tarou retorted towards who the hell Teiro was. Remembering his pre-sleep memories in the shaped silicon device gently enveloping his body, He slowly rose his body.

“Good morning, master Teirow. I have made use of override (data overwrite). How does your body feel.”

On that unexpected stranger’s voice, he hurriedly turned its eyes towards its origin point. There was the sphere he had personally named Koume.

“Not... bad. But... eh? Huh? What’s this mean? What did I...”

What the sphere. And what he put to mouth were both languages he had never heard in his life.

And by it, there was something he feared.

That he had fully come to understand it.

Chapter 04

“... Okay!”

Ichijou Tarou raised a single motivated yell, and removed his sluggish body from the device.

“There are way too many things I want to ask, but is it alright ‘f I interrogate ya a bit?”

He lowered his hips down by the sphere, with its lamp flickering onto the ground, and held his knees. Taking a sidelong glance into it, he continued.

“So what might you be? A guide? Do you do somethin’ in place of humans?”

The sphere slowly spun on the spot, making one doubt if any one side was its front. It flashed its lamp towards Tarou, and let out a voice.

“In regards to both questions, I must refute, Mister Teirow. Koume is not a guide, and it hasn’t been designed to do any specific job in the place of human labor. Or rather, from this appearance, it should be apparent such a thing would be impossible, dunce.”

“Okay, at the end, I think I heard somethin’ unpleasant, but le’s just put that aside. So are you that perfect AI thingamajig? The next gen majimon? And you’ve already set your name as Koume?”

Tarou’s memory. Or at least in his memories of the twenty first century were at a level where even the hint of a perfected AI had yet to be grasped. If the machine naturally responding to him at that very moment was something based in artificial intelligence, it was something he would be surprised about.

“What you refer to as a perfect AI has not been defined by the current race of humanity. But at the very least, Koume behaves based on a program, and operates on a quantum brain powered by a carbon battery. The name is set by the owner, Mister Teirow. It has been recorded as something you set.”

The orb shakily rolled left and right with its lamp flickering in accordance with

its voice. Tarou raised a groan of, 'Yeeaaaah', as he questioned further.

"Well, it's just an inkling, but I kinda get it, so let's put that aside. You said your owner was me, but what would that mean? Personally, I'm delighted, but you won't try to wring a large sum outa me later? Like claiming paying the store fee and your fee are separate things? I've a bit of a trauma there."

"Affirmative. Deny both allegations, per... Mister Teirow. By the DNA print possessed of current owner, it corresponds with you 100%. Milky way imperial law, paragraph 228, subsection 83, by in the case of emergency evacuation, all rights of ownership to this vessel have been transferred to you. Data on old cabaret customs have not been recorded in the databank. It is your own fault for being deceived on the cost, per... processing... pervert."

"No, when you tried so hard, at least rephrase it!"

"Understood, Mister H. Teirow. Do you have any other questions?"

"That H was definitely the H of hentai, wasn't it? Let's see... well, whatever. Right. This ship. It's been stopped for a while, right? Accident?"

"Affirmative, Mister Teirow. The sections from the fuel to the engines have been detached. The cause has not been recorded."

"Whee, for real... 'f there's no engine, that ain't even a ship anymore. We're just floatin' in space."

"Affirmative, Mister Teirow. You are in a bit of an oversized coffin. Ha. Ha. Ha."

"Exactly, hahaha!! To hell with that!!"

Bending his wrist, Tarou poked the sphere. It rolled with him.

"Violence does not bring about anything, Mister Teirow. Well, the acquaintance that said that was found out for his cheating, and stabbed. HAHAAH."

"No, I just used that joke... even so, my situation 'asn't changed for the better, huh. Not bein' able to move kills the man... Ah, right. Do you know what year A.D. it is? And around how far we are from earth."

"Dearest apologies, Mister Teirow. In relation to year, the term A.D. does not

align with the databanks. In regards to the planet known as earth, it has been recorded as a planet of ancient folklore. But no one has ever confirmed its existence.”

“Folklore!? Oy, oy, how far in the future is this...”

On that unexpected response, Tarou stretched himself out across the ground. He had been certain it was quite a distant future, but he hadn’t even imagined the Earth’s very existence would be in doubt.

“Now that’s a doozy... ah, and didn’t you just say Milky way empire, or somethin’ like that? Is there any planet that humans live nearby? I don’t quite get what ownership lets me do either.”

“Yes, Mister Teirow. There exists a terraformed planet 20000 light years from this point. In reference to the transfer of ownership, it is emergency evacuation regulation. Meaning, the case where the previous owner has been lost, and the rest of the crew remain on the spacecraft, the ship can set free. If a nationality registry or company name is left on it, its ownership will return to its original affiliation once in port, but this ship’s ownership has not been recorded. In name and in essence, this ship is your personal belonging.”

“Oh I see,” he crossed his arms. He didn’t get it down to its finest details, but he understood plenty, that this giant piece of oversized garbage seemed to rightfully belong to him. And understanding anything else was unnecessary.

“Hah... even so, twenty thousand lightyears, eh? Sounds like they’d have a warp. But if there’s no engine, that ain’t happening... and wait a minute there. Havin’ come so far, why was I woken up? So I get to learn all this stuff before I die? A bothersome act of kindness?”

“Affirmative. Refuting point, Mister Teirow. An overdrive by compressing stored oxygen is possible. In regards to fuel, it is surmised to be possible to use items in the residential area. At present, the reason the cold sleep device reactivated is surmised to be because it calculated a final possibility that you could be saved. It was definitely not harassment. Probably.”

“Mhm, mhm. It bothers me why you tacked on that last part, but I’ll even leave that aside. Anyways, what’s this possibility of me being saved?”

“Yes, from the ship’s present relative velocity, it should be approaching a stargate in the immediate vicinity. The distance to a space station along with the distance gained by using an overdrive through turning the residential district to fuel are nearly identical.”

“A space station!! I see, come to think of it, that’s right. It’s not like humans can only live on planets... wait, wait right a second. Something’s caught me, that. If we’ll just barely make it in the maximum distance we can warp, then if we miss it, that’s the end?”

“Affirmative, Mister Teirow. The next change will come in 17,000 years time. The operational limit for a cold sleep device is 500 years, so the rest goes without saying.”

“Goes without saying? Quite a way to put it. But I see... um, Koume. Since it wen’ outta the way to wake me up, that would mean ya can’t move this ship yourself, right?”

“Affirmative again, Mister Teirow. As even you can see in your human shortsightedness, Koume is only able to roll around. What sort of things are you expecting from a simple ball?”

“Yeah, yeah. Sorry for that. Then what are we supposed to do, ya’ bastard?”

“I’m sure there is only one option remaining, Mister Teirow. You do it.”

“Me?”

The approximately ten-centimeter diameter sphere rolling along the ground. Tarou stared dumbfound at its vivid green and red flashing lights, and his expression persisted in one of failed understanding.

“Hey, I’m a twenty first century antique here. A human of a time where when it came to spaceships, we’d gone to the moon and back at most. And y’er telling me to do it?”

“Mister Teirow. I do not know this moon you refer to, but that is correct. You do it.

With those words, Koume rolled across a hard iron plate. She came to a gentle stop in front of the modified cold-sleep device Tarou had been stationed

in before.

“By the way, Mister Teirow. You have gotten quite fluent at galactic standard language.”

“Galactic standard... r-right. What’s with this. Why can I speak these words I’ve never learned? Does it have to do with the whack knowledge in my head?”

“Uncertain, Mister Teirow. Only you could understand what strange things go on in your head. But I do know about the language.”

Koume repeated a flash of green, as she tapped against the cold-sleep device.

“Override. Mister Teirow.”

“Override?”

“That is right. Override. This device before your eyes has written over your memories. Who made it, and when it was made, and why it is here, that is unknown. But how to use this device is recorded in the databank.”

“Overwriting... memory?”

Tarou let his body shake along with the chill running up his spine.

“W-wait a second. The inside of my head’s been messed with? Somethin’ like that’s... h-huh? Japanese... Japanese ain’t coming out. Wait, calm down. Nonono, I should be able to speak it. How many decades has it been...”

“Mister Teirow. Your language cortex has been overridden. Please calm down. You shouldn’t be feeling any discomfort.”

“As if I could calm down!!”

As Tarou gave an agitated cry, he grabbed Koume with his right hand, and lifted her up to face level.

“Mister Teirow. I apologize for arbitrarily writing over your language. But it is a fact there was no other way. No precise database of Japanese has been left behind.”

Still holding Koume up, Tarou grit his teeth with rough breath. After a single deep exhale, he let his shaking hands slowly lower her to the ground. Even for the sake of a momentary diversion, throwing Koume against the wall wouldn’t

accomplish anything, and Tarou understood that well enough.

“Well... right... sorry.”

He dug his face between his knees, and took another deep breath. Koume was bobbing back and forth beside him but his thoughts were unclear. Without letting out a single word, he calmed himself down.

After an extent of time had passed. Tarou lifted his face, and turned his eyes to the still-bobbing globe-shaped AI.

“So what do I have to become? A pilot? Or an engineer?”

Saying that, he slowly stood, and strapped himself into the cold-sleep device.

“Mister Teirow. I am thankful for your resolution. But it is neither pilot nor engineer. While both roles are, of course, effective ones, Koume has the minimum required knowledge to fulfill them. Those are jobs where an individual’s nature and disposition do not bring about a transfiguration. The specialized professions divided into pilot and engineer are not required at present, and whether you could become one is a separate issue.”

Koume flickered her lamps, as she moved in front of him.

“Mister Teirow. Are you aware of the structure for a computer to operate?”

Tarou closed his eyes a little, and gave a small, ‘I see’.

“The programming, eh?. It’s true without that, nothing would start... but don’t you need knowledge on what you’d be programming? Like how you couldn’t make accounting software if you didn’t know accounting.”

“Affirmative, Mister Teirow. I think it is wonderful for you to be so quick on the uptake. But...”

As if she were human, Koume took a deep breath.

“You already possess that knowledge, Mister Teirow. Just who might you be?”

Chapter 05

“Good morning, mister Teirow. The override is complete. How does your body feel?”

The modified cold-sleep device. Koume swayed to and fro before Tarou’s eyes.

“The worst,” Tarou spat out the words, throwing his terribly washed-out body onto the cold iron floor.

“Ah, nice ‘n cool... by the way. The guy who thought up that programmin’ method was an idiot. There are few things out there as unreliable ‘s the human brain, ‘ya know?”

New information definitely did exist in his head. The programming knowledge was recollected in his mind as he spoke.

“Koume does not comprehend the problem, Mister Teirow. Programming with the brain is an overly standard method.”

In regards to Tarou, Koume returned an inorganic feminine voice. Feeling irritation at Koume’s lack of facial expression, Tarou continued on the conversation.

“Now that’s something’. Has hittin’ one out on a keyboard been put on the endangered list?”

“Negative, Mister Teirow. Its usage is not in danger of extinction, it has gone extinct. The interface known as a keyboard has already faded from common use. Only a portion of eccentrics still pick them up as a hobby.”

To Koume’s answer, “Well, no helpin’ if you’ve got somethin’ like that,” said Tarou as he hazily thought over the programming window in his head. In his eyes, countless functions were displayed in a three dimensional crystal lattice around him. Of them, he could duplicate, connect, derive, and alter them freely. The processing was exceedingly instinctual, and the sensation was close to stacking up toy building blocks. The contents of each and every function were

much too complex, and he barely understood them, but for him to make use of them that wasn't a problem.

"So it's like pointing a remote at the TV without any knowledge about television itself."

Tarou summarized his impression of the functions. To that, "Correct," Koume added on.

"The contents of the functions are all templates developed by specialists in the field. You can reform them however you want, and if you have safety in mind, you can use them as-is. As you have said, the human brain is too unreliable to leave any and everything up to it."

"I see," said Tarou as he observed various function blocks.

"But when it's all so unfamiliar, the fact I know so much about it is a disgusting feelin'... Heh, this output's reading right off my brain waves, eh? Cheers to the future."

Tarou muttered in surprise and admiration. He turned towards the lone door in the room, and walked straight up to it. Just like when he'd looked over it the other day, the door didn't have anything that looked like a sencer. But in Tarou's head, the 'Door' function was clearly displayed

"So that's how it is... um, Um, link door to master route. Deploy template... huh, it's locked. The encryption key is... ah, here it is. Oh right, I'm the owner, aren't I? Connect code and lock. Run unlock."

The long silence of the room was finally broken by click, and the sound of moving metal.

"Whoah... it opened. Wicked!!"

"Mister Teirow. You can carry out the orders even if you don't say it a loud. You look stupid when you stand there mumbling to yourself."

"An' you're as toxic as ever! Leave me be! I was just a bit moved there is all... right, I'll store that as a new template. It would be a pain going through that every time."

As he said that, Tarou stored that chain of commands in his brain as a new

function. Satisfied that he would be able to go through it next time without much thought, he posed Koume a question.

“Come to think of it, it’s not just the doors that run on this system, right? In that case, can all humans of this time period use it? That brain programming thing?”

Kouma rolled from side to side as she flickered her lights.

“Affirmative, Mister Teirow. The remote frontiers may be a different story, but generally, everyone born in imperial territory have an override applied right after birth. Of course, just at the minimum level required to live a normal life.”

“Really is the future,” Tarou gave another moving murmur before going on.

“But this sure is a nice time. ‘f you ‘ave it, you don’t need any studyin’, right? You can jus’ ‘ave all the necessary info loaded right in. Dammit, I was born in the wrong time. Ah, right. Can I load some common sense, or some info on the ship? I don’t know how big it is, so a map’d be real convenient.”

“...”

“You think they have the scan data on that cute chick? Whooah, my dreams are growin’... Koume-san?”

“... Yes, Mister Teirow. If you wish to store memory not as a short-term function, but as permanent information, I highly recommend studying with your own eyes and ears.”

“... Meanin’?”

“Mister Teirow. Please recall our previous conversation. I stated that humans are bestowed an override right after birth. Humans become driven by the necessity of voluntary action shortly after they are born. In most cases, the parents act in their stead, carrying out everything for the child to that point.”

“... Yeah, I get what you’re sayin’. Go on.”

“Yes, Mister Teirow. Revolving around the previous notion, the natural course would be for a human to receive an override once voluntary action becomes necessary. But that is not the case, it occurs right after birth. There is only one reason.”

“... I see. It’s because you’re overwriting data. It’s best to use it on a baby with an empty head, right?”

“Affirmative, Mister Teirow. You really are smart. So you do not have to bring all your problems to me. I am not your counselor.”

“Hmm, will your first kiss with the ground be a gentle one of lovers, or one intense enough to break both your front teeth. I think that would depend on your answer.”

“Yes, what is it, Mister Teirow. If it is within my scope, then...”

“Answer me!! What part of me was written over! What did I lose!?”

Lifting Koume up, Tarou cried out. He didn’t have any intention to slam his only hope in the situation against something, but he was angry. And more than anything, the fear he was losing himself caused his hands to shake.

“... I apologize, Mister Teirow. Unlike language, where a specific location and function were overridden, your general knowledge was written over, and it is impossible to estimate what was lost.”

The expected answer. Tarou closed his eyes for a while, letting out a deep breath.

“Hah... we had this exchange yesterday, didn’t we... it’s no good. My emotions have been going all over the place. It’s something I should’ve somewhat known, but... dammit, that still doesn’t make it a good feeling.”

Tarou tried bringing up various memories to confirm what he had lost, but eventually realizing it was wasted effort, he gave up. Including all forms of memory, there was an enormous amount of information within him, what’s more, searching for memories that were overwritten was akin to looking for what wasn’t there.

“I hope the memories I wanted to forget were written over, but... ah, no good. I still remember my, ‘Right arm aching!!’ back in middle school. Tehe.”

Tarou purposely acted cheerful, heading out to bring a close to the matter. Koume likely didn’t have any ill intent, and no matter how the conversation developed, he feared he would just be taking his anger out on her.

“Now then, now then, let’s see what we have. Let’s try movin’ this spaceship around. So Koume. What should I do first?” He addressed the sphere in his hands. On his palm, Koume flashed various bulbs.”

“Yes, Mister Teirow. First, you need to connect the residential sector’s electricity to the overdrive system. But there is no need to panic. It will likely take some time, but as Koume once said, hurrying and panicking are different things.”

“Yeah, yeah, got it. Are you my mother? By the way, what’s the estimated time needed to reform this ship? Like before ‘n after.”

“Yes, Mister Teirow. The work is estimated to take approximately five years.”

“..... Yes?”

“As I said, Mister Teirow. Escaping reality is not a very effective means. You need to perform an overdrive with nothing but our remaining systems. For a beginner BISHOP user, it will likely take that amount of time.”

“Bishop?”

“That’s right, Mister Teirow. Brain Impulse Sequence to High Output Programming. Shortened to BISHOP. The system overwritten into you.”

“I see... that sounds kinda cool. You mean I can use holy offensive and healing magic, but I have a slow growth?”

“Mister Teirow. I do apologize, but I have no idea what you are talking about. Of course, you do not have to fear any failed item appraisals, and I won’t abandon you in the bar at your low level.”

“The person ‘oo made you was definitely insane... but five years, huh. I know I don’t ‘ave a choice, but I really don’t think my psyche ‘ll hold out. I don’t mean to brag, but I’m confident I’d die of loneliness in three days, tops. And with nothin’ but those nutrient tubes every day, I really will die.”

“Lonely is an overstatement, Mister Teirow. You have me, do you not?”

“That so.....”

“... Mister Teirow. I have all sorts of knowledge on the food stock and forms of entertainment used by the crew. If you do not need me, you could just say it...”

“Koume-sama, I’ll be in your care for these five long years.”

Putting Koume down in the center of the corridor, Tarou swiftly prostrated himself. Touching three fingers together, the satisfactory dogeza he gave filled him with a needless sense of accomplishment.

“But five years, eh... really makes ‘ya think.”

Raising his face, Tarou stared far away.

“Do not worry, Mister Teirow. Judging by the cold sleep device’s battery, it is estimated you have been drifting through space for at least fifty years. What is another five years to you at this point? It is mere lost time.”

Koume proudly flickered her lights.

In regards to her, Tarou could only let out a sigh.

Chapter 06

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you,”

“Happy birthday, Mister Teirownley,”

“Stop it, You’re hurtin’ my feelin’s, so stop with that name. And isn’t Dear Teirow good enough? For both rhythm and my psyche!?”

“That which you call free will exists within me.”

“Ah, what’s this. My eyes are sweatin’.”

“Are those tears of gratitude, Mister Teirow? My, my, it seems I am a sinful woman.”

The two voices resounding through the narrow control room. Beneath that calming atmosphere they gave off, Tarou could feel his hands shaking from anxiety.

“Now then, let’s quite foolin’ around, an’ check over it again. Overdrive equipment.”

“System green.”

“Battery supply.”

“Green”

“Alignment and estimated phase shift.”

“Both green.”

“Shield. That can be left at the minimum value.”

“Green All systems green, Mister Teirow. This is already the fifth time. Why not resolve yourself already?”

Tarou raised a groan at Koume’s words. As he operated BISHOP with bloodshot eyes, he checked the detailed systems of the space ship again.

“I mean look, we only have one chance. If we fail, it’s the end, right? This one

year of effort would be for nothin', and we'll welcome 'n a slow and hopeless death."

"Mister Teirow. If I may have my say, I charge by starlight, and exist in a state of semi-permanence."

"No, no, Koume-san. See, we're in this together. If I go down, you're comin' down with me."

Tarou deployed a program in a corner of his mind, reaching a hand to the swaying Koume ball in front of him.

"Yeah, they really are unshapely. If only I'd 'ad some proper tools."

Tarou turned the two wheels— more like crossed sticks— attached to Koume's round body with his finger.

"They are plenty a help to me, Mister Teirow. At the very least, I do not get stuck on the wiring anymore. This is a large step forwards."

Koume flashed her lights, as she spun her new legs Tarou had furnished her with. The clanking sound the sticks made whenever they hit against the floor was a source of dissatisfaction to Tarou, but Koume the AI didn't seem to mind it.

"Well, I think they're well done for somethin' I put together in mah free time... Error Check complete. Think we can finally blow this joint?"

Once the program he'd written over the last week to check for errors had finished executing, Tarou took a big stretch, and lay on the floor.

"That is a splendid idea, Mister Teirow. But I have already heard those words 142 hours ago. Koume now doubts their sincerity."

"Don't be like that, my little QΤπ. It's our one an' only chance. No way you can overdo it with stackin' up caution. And the first check did find an error, right?"

"Affirmative, Mister Teirow. But battery supply deviation temporarily rendering the toilet unusable is not much of a problem at all. Even if you wet yourself, Koume minds it not. I would only tease you once or twice per week."

"Bloody 'ell!! And you're goin' to leave a strange amount 'f space, bringin' it up right when I'm about to forget, right!?"

After Tarou poked Koume's round body in his retort, he took a single deep breath. He silently stationed himself in the cold sleep machine he'd been using when he first awoke, and activated BISHOP.

"Hey... just hypothetically. If the drive fails, and we know there's nothin' we can do, just send me straight into cold sleep. I don't have the resolve to spend the rest of my life here, and if I know I'm goin' to die, honestly, I think I'll be too scared to do anythin'."

In order to concentrate on BISHOP, Tarou loosened up his body, and closed his eyes.

"... Understood, Mister Teirow. Though I doubt it will come to that. You have talent with BISHOP, and the remodeling of the ship was carried out at a shockingly steady pace. I think it is fine if you hold some confidence in yourself. If I may be blunt, you are probably a genius."

As Koume circled around to the side of the device, she flashed her lamps approvingly. Tarou gave a bitter smile, shaking his head as, "I just didn't have anythin' else to do," he gave a light reply.

"Even so, Mister Teirow. It is certainly true that apart from sleep and eating, and... well, your various other forms of entertainment, it was beyond my estimates that you would devote every waking hour to the ship's blueprints. But even so, the remodeling took less than half the estimated time. If there is any word to call that besides talent, then I would like to hear it."

"You sure know how to praise... and thanks for that... and wait, you saw!? I wanna die!!"

"No, I haven't seen a thing, Mister Teirow. But you do seem to enjoy quite a wide variety of genres. Even I was..."

"Stop it!! What's with you, god!! We're going already!! Yep, switch on!!"

Tarou half-carelessly started up the program, looking over the stream of commands executing in the depths of his eyes.

... Run Program Noah...

... Execute reroute_Battery_circuit...

The room's lights flickered out, and the area was completely shrouded in darkness. Including the air conditioning, all machinery ceased any sounds of operation, and only a small sound from the cold sleep device he was contained in remained in his ears.

... Position Check executed without error...

... Destination Point secured without error...

... Destination: SG-3835, nearest Star Gate...

The minute vibrations he could feel with his body. They gradually grew larger, eventually shaking the room in a massive quake. Tarou gripped hard onto the silicon device as he grit his teeth.

“Weeeelll noooowww, how far cannn we goooooooo!!”

... Run Overdrive...

For a moment, a high sound pierced his ears.

Yet what visited right after was complete silence.

The thousands of function blocks that had been hectically flashing all around him stopped dead in their tracks, sitting still in their orderly suspended space.

(Did I die?)

Tarou thought at first.

Within a world without sound, movement, and even light. But what signified this wasn't the world of the dead was his comrade who had accompanied him the past year.

“Mister Teirow. Congratulations. The drive executed without issue.”

Tarou timidly opened his eyes. And naturally, the area was still in darkness.

“... Haha.”

“ETA relative to destination point: 2000 milliseconds. ETA relative to ship, approximately 15 minutes.”

“We did it... We did it!!”

“Remaining battery. Position and direction. Life-support system. No problems to report.”

“Hot damn!! We frickin’ did it!! Did you see my goddam skillz!!
Whoohoooo!!”

As Tarou leapt out into the darkness, he entrusted his body to the forces at work, smacking into and writhing about the ground. Eventually his hands found their way to a sphere he knew well, and he gave a kiss to that dimly glowing light.

“Yippee!! Koume, it’s all thanks to you! Thanks!!”

“Mister Teirow. It has been little over a year since Koume’s birth. No matter what district of the Galactic Empire’s law you look at, this is undoubtedly a crime. You pervert.”

“Call me a pervert or whatever you want. Whether it be jail or prison, bring it on. At the very least, there’ll be someone else there, right? Hehehe, that’d be straight up heaven.”

Tarou recalled the lonely year he had spend on the ship, and thought he could bear with whatever pain was to come. Koume was the sole existence to support him through his solitude, but she was an AI. While he had the greatest of gratitude towards her, she was unable to become something that could fill the deepest parts of his loneliness.

“When I meet someone, what should I do first? Say howdy? Ah, maybe not. Don’t know anythin’ about the times. Think I’ll be fine? They won’t think I’m a rude person, will they?”

Still on cloud nine, Tarou fantasized over how he’d greet these future folk he’d yet to meet. But as if to ridicule him, Koume let out a composed tone.

“I do apologize for raining on your parade, Mister Teirow. But we have a problem.”

Tarou’s wriggling body came to a sudden stop.

“... ‘f it’s a problem, then I can’t expect any good news, can I.”

“Affirmative, Mister Teirow. But we can only call this an unavoidable coincidence. This ship was not equipped with a sufficient amount of scanning apparatus.”

“Don’t beat around the bush, Koume-chan. What do you mean by scan? We gonna hit an asteroid or somethin’?”

“Negative, Mister Teirow. We can slip passed asteroids to a certain extent, and calculating the probability of this ship colliding with one will have you counting a detestable amount of zeroes after the decimal point.”

“So what is it?”

“Yes, Mister Teirow. Around this drive’s destination point, there is a high probability of a presence of multiple other vessels. The threat level is unknown, but it is doubtful that they are private passenger ships.”

“Multiple... eh. If they’re not passenger ships, what are they?”

“Yes, Mister Teirow. A consecutive high energy signature has been detected around the ships.”

Turning her cross wheels in circles, Koume flickered her lamps.

“I can say with high confidence that the ships are carrying out some form of combat.”

Chapter 07

“In combat... w-wait a tic. Is the empire at war or something?”

Within the darkness, Tarou brought his face closer to her flickering light.

“Negative, Mister Teirow. A definite enemy power to oppose the empire does not exist, so war itself is impossible.”

“Yeah? Then what is it. Some sort ‘f scuffle? Is this era like that? Instead of exchanging fists, you bring out the artillery?”

“I wonder, Mister Teirow. Perhaps those sorts of people exist, but Koume’s data bank does not contain any records of such common sense. Could it be some internal power struggle?”

“Oy, you mean like gangsters goin’ at one another? Anyways, what should we do? Gettin’ dragged in doesn’t sound like fun.”

“Let’s see, this ship is only equipped with a laser to blow debris out of the way. By my calculations, if we get into an actual battle, we will undoubtedly fall.”

“Fall... ooooy, what should we do? What should we do!?”

“Yes, what should we do, Mister Teirow. By the way, we’ve almost arrived. I highly recommend you grab onto something.”

No sooner than Koume had finished those words, the tremors visited the ship once more. Tarou quickly crept to the cold sleep device, holding onto it as he activated BISHOP, frantically searching for a way to defend himself.

“It’s nOoOo GoooDdd, thE WeAponnss weeErrre all DetaAAaacheedd.”

His tone turned strange in the shaking of the ship. In his eyes, there were a number of self-defense features that showed notices of, ‘OFFLINE’, and he guessed they had been separated along with the engine in whatever accident had left them stranded in space.

And just as with the start of the Drive, silence descended without any warning.

... Overdrive terminating...
... reroute_Battery_Circuit terminating...
... Program Noah terminating...

Those green messages flowed in one after the next. The battery used for the overdrive connected back to the residential quarters, and alongside some flickers, light returned to the room.

“Are we... there?”

Tarou strained his ears for sounds of battle, but after thinking a while, he realized it was a stupid action, and gave up. As there was no air for sound to travel through in space, there was no way he would ever hear anything at all.

“Koume, how’re things lookin’? Do we have a screen or anythin’?”

“Yes, we do, Mister Teirow. Let us go to your room. We do not have many displays you can freely change the output of.”

With those words, she began turning her wheels towards the exit of the room. Tarou impatiently lifted her up, making a dash for the crew quarters he had fashioned into his own room over the year.

“From the results of a wide-area scan, there are four ships in the neighborhood. They are all around 45km away... oh, it seems one of the ships has fallen. Its response has disappeared.”

“Geh, doesn’t look like they’re here for a picnic!! Did it have to be here and now!?”

Tarou brushed the cups and food trays onto the floor, resting Koume onto the desk. Koume extended some tentacle-like cables from her spherical body, latching onto the jack at the bottom of the display.

“... ‘Ello, ‘ello, what’s all this. Is that supposed to be... a ship?”

The strange object on the screen caused Tarou to let out a dubious voice. Rather than a ship, it looked like more like a hunk of scrap. Iron rods, plates, cables and glass domes, where if you looked at each individual piece, it seemed as if they had all come from different crafts. Such pieces had seemingly been put into a trash compactor to form a single large lump. The scary part was that

it seemed to function properly as a ship. At times its jet engines would spout to control its direction, and from its pipe, beam-like blue lights would occasionally fire out.

“Just how do you make a ship with a design like that... you can’t just write that one off as crazy. Or what is it? We got a genius recycler on our hands?”

“No, Mister Teirow. That craft was not made by human hands. Things are taking a terrible turn. Of the three remaining ships, it seems two of them are WIND.

“Wind?”

“Yes, WIND, Mister Teirow. Wild Instructure Natural Drones. They are pretty much AIs that have gone wild. They strengthen and amplify themselves. And if it is for the sake of their own reproduction, they shall make use of whatever structure they find around.”

“Erk, I didn’t catch all of that, but they’re something like space viruses, right?”

“That is right, Mister Teirow. I believe you have the correct recognition of them. It depends on how you define them, but as intelligent mechanical lifeforms, they are seen as humanity’s natural enemy.”

“Oopsies. Then is that how it is? Then if that shoddy ship over there that seems to be fighting them loses, then it’s all over for us too? ... Best of luck!! Go get them, you shabby sunnavabitch!!”

No matter how you looked at it, the ship Tarou called words of encouragement at wasn’t made with combat as its primary function, and it was likely made for some sort of business. With green colored arms, and multiple cargo holds installed onto it, it continued violently exchanging beams with the WIND. At times, a blue light would surround the whole ship, and Tarou guessed that was the enemy attacks hitting square on, and the shields activating.

“Is there anythin’ we can do to help out? Can we converge our debris beams to power them up... or something? Isn’t the enemy kinda getting close to us?”

“Negative. And negative, Mister Teirow. No matter how we singe the enemy shield with our anti-debris-laser, their shield’s regeneration speed will surely be faster. And the enemy isn’t growing closer. We are moving towards them.”

The display contained the form of the WIND approaching at a frightful rate. What he was looking at was nothing more than some points of light on a radar screen, and while they weren't doing anything, they would likely make contact soon.

"Oy, oy, oy, oy, what are we going to do? If we get close, they're definitely going to attack us, right?"

"Yes, that's right, Mister Teirow. It is only natural that it's easier to aim the closer you are. It has ceased its attack on the other ship."

Tarou peered into the display again. It projected an optic zoom on a part of the ominous hunk of scraps. The gun muzzle-like parts that had been aimed on the shoddy ship to that point were slowly turning.

"D-deploy the shield!! Change direction!! Don't let the enemy set its aim!!"

Tarou cried out as he opened his eyes wide, and started up BISHOP. Within it, he could see the area around the shield control function surrounded by red, notifying him that Koume was trying to assist him. It was an indicator not to touch the area because someone else was working on it.

"Run direction control, full speed... is no good. We'll all be crushed. Damn, modify template. Conduct rotation centered current location!!"

Tarou expanded the direction control function, changing it from its initial execution to turn around the ship's center of gravity, and setting the residential quarters they were currently in as the center of rotation. If he didn't, then following the law of inertia, there was a possibility he would be crushed flat. The program he took a few seconds to change executed at once; the ship began turning with an elliptical trajectory.

"Whoah!! They're shooting at us!!"

Blue lights flashed across the display. The camera locked onto the WIND ship switched over to one projecting the mass of light flying at them.

"Oh Budddhhhhaaaa!!"

Tarou braced his body, clinging onto the desk for dear life. His slightly-opened eyes could see the beam collide with the ship, before dispersing in all directions

and fading away.

“Huh? We didn’t shake as much as I thought we would.”

“Yes, Mister Teirow. This ship has a high mass, and the shields are exhibiting enough of an effect. Unless they continue firing on us for quite a long time, we should be fine.”

Tarou gained some relief from Koume’s voice, but taking those words the other way, they were in danger if the firing continued. The fate of this ship looked no different than that of the shoddy work ship that just had its shield pierced and its armor hit directly.

“Whooooooooaaah!! That ship totally just took a hit!!”

Unable to stay as he was, Tarou started up BISHOP again. Anything was fine, he thought, as he desperately worked his head to see if there was any hope of salvation.

“...Heeeey, Koume. You said this ship has a high mass, right?”

“Affirmative, Mister Teirow. I don’t know what this ship was initially, but its scale rivals that of a cruiser. Even if half of it’s been detached, that makes no difference to the fact it is enormous.”

It did have enough capsules for four thousand people after all, he thought, as he programmed away with BISHOP. Koume was rapidly reprogramming the shield management program, and its display was changing around at a frightfully rapid pace.

“... Alright!! And off we go!!”

Tarou gave the direction control program a minor adjustment to finely divert the ship’s course. As there wasn’t an engine, he couldn’t make any major changes, but drawing a slow curve was still possible.

“I don’t know about this WIND thing, but meeting us was the end of adbweh!!?”

Before Tarou could finish his line, the ship crashed straight into the wind, giving it a great shake. Tarou flew to the side as if punched in the face, colliding pitifully into the wall in the direction the ship was headed. Tarou had

accelerated proportionally to the ship's deceleration.

“Erk... hmm...”

Having hit his head, Tarou hazily probed through the flickering BISHOP screen.

“No... damage. Hehe, take that.”

Tarou looked over all the ship's systems.

Enduring the pain in his body, he mustered his might to make a face of triumph.

Chapter 08

A prominent salvager, even on Alba Station, Maar was licking lips at a haul much greater than usual.

“Looks like I’m in luck today. I’m sure there are loads of live circuits left behind.”

She annoying swept her long red hair out of her face as she approached the space ship she had found on a wide area scan. Getting to a distance close enough to touch, she started up her BISHOP and sent the sunken ship a signal.

“No response. Since they don’t have any ship registration, is it a smuggling ship?”

From the experience she had earned in her five years as a salvager, Maar had learned that ships without registration were rarely used for any decent means. On top of making it difficult to prove their ownership, it was impossible to get them insured. If someone overlooked all those risks to avoid ship registration, it meant there had to be some form of profit that exceeded them. What’s more, the sort that people didn’t talk about.

“I hope it wasn’t smuggling people, but... huh?”

She observed the circumference of the sunken ship. Feeling something was off, she brought her own ship— the Rockboy— to a steady stop. What could it be, she thought for a while, before realizing what was generally equipped on a ship was nowhere to be found.

“It’s not armed? Could it be someone got here before me...”

If another salvager had already pulled out, then there probably wasn’t anything of value left behind. From what she could see, the sunken ship was preserved in a pretty state, but that didn’t say much about its contents.

“The area around the engine’s perfectly intact... was it a weapons salvager? I didn’t hear of such a report.”

She started up BISHOP again, reading over the salvage permit she had saved. Issued by the management of the space station, it contained information on the discovered ship. Its ownership rights, the taxes it had to pay, the document covered a lot of ground.

“Yeah, doesn’t say a thing. An unarmed ship in this day and age...”

Maar sent an amazed expression towards the ship equipped without taking common sense into account, before reaching a conclusion it was probably a transport ship for some fleet.

“They left it behind after an accident. Poor ship... but don’t worry. I’ll reuse you for something meaningful.”

As she muttered that to herself, Maar moved the arms all over her own ship. She fixed her arm onto the sunken wreck, and protruded a large radar device from the hull.

“Run power_Scanning.”

The parabolic antenna-shaped radar let off blue sparks, wrapping the sunken ship. Information about the ship flowing in a steady stream to the depths of Maar’s eyes, as the figures organized themselves on her BISHOP interface.

“... What’s... this...”

Maar read through the information in an instant, and frowned at their irregularity.

“It’s empty... no, that’s wrong! This ship’s just a model!!”

The information told her this craft’s bulk wasn’t actually functional as a ship, it was absurd and unequal information. Maar had a bad premonition as she hurriedly stowed away her radar arm.

“Wide area scan!! Hurry!”

As Maar shouted it out, a scan low in accuracy, but high in speed was carried out. At the three points displayed on her radar screen, she inferred something terrible was going on.

“No response from the identification signal. So it’s WIND? ... No! They baited me!?”

Hurriedly starting up her engine, Maar set into preparations for battle. As she deftly handled her BISHOP, she was unable to conceal her unrest at this baffling situation.

“I’ve never heard of the WIND taking such action before... could it be a new strain? Should I report this to the imperial government...”

In an instant, her hand reached out to open a communication channel with the station, but she stopped herself. She didn’t have the leisure for a chat right now, and even if she told them, she determined they wouldn’t believe her.

“No matter how I look at it, an overdrive isn’t going to make it in time... Startup turrets, deploy shield. Target the approaching threat.”

Two turrets exposed themselves from the hull, rotating towards their target. The turrets loaded onto a salvage ship weren’t powerful by any means, but against a small opponent, they would be effective enough. From the acceleration of the radar signal, Maar determined the enemy was probably a small vessel.

At that moment, a large warning notice appeared at the top of Maar’s BISHOP interface.

“A reservation for an Overdrive endpoint!! Enemy reinforcements!?”

Maar instantly sent a signal to deny the reservation, and activated her warp jamming equipment. But before she could do anything, the space reservation was already fixed, and a strong repulsive force was building in the area.

“What is this, really!!”

Maar’s eyes went teary as she began her attack on the WIND that had entered her range. Whether a spot of fortune or not, the repulsing force that broke out acted as a wall, letting her avoid the battle becoming three on one.

“Jamming off!! Direct all battery power to shield!!”

Around a few dozen seconds since she started her bombardment. The enemy finally began their attack, a blue blaster beam illuminating countless points. Maar’s ship managed to avoid the first volley hitting, but as the distance between them close, the enemy attacks increased in accuracy.

“Erk! You’ve sure done it!”

The vibrations rocking the ship, and the dispersing lights of blasters. As the beam-spitting Rockboy’s turrets finally caught the enemy, they sent out direct hits one after the next.

“I’m begging you! Hold a bit longer!!”

She could see the shield battery draining, as warning signals twinkled over her BISHOP. The Rockboy’s shield running dry coincided right with the destruction of one of the enemy ships.

“Kyaaaah!!”

Maar raised a scream at the following explosion. She contained her urge to cry as she hurriedly inspected her ship.

... Space reservation terminating, initiator has completed drive...

On the alert that came up in her inspection, she hurriedly raised her face. In the monitor, she confirmed a massive ship that had emerged by warp drive coming towards her at a tremendous speed.

“W-what? A freighter? Could it be help has arrived.”

What entered her eyes was a ship of boorish, angular construction. She had been certain WIND reinforcements were coming, so she had expected a ship of their characteristic chaotic design. She felt her expectations had been betrayed, but it wasn’t a bad feeling at all.

“I can leave it to them... right? Change objective, take distance from target!”

Seeing what seemed to be a freighter press forward without changing course, Maar thought it would take charge of the WIND in the way of its planned route. She remained mindful of the Rockboy’s armor that had been damaged from frequent fire as she concentrated her fire on the other remaining enemy.

“Keep it together, Rocky!! If it’s you, anything is possible!! ... hey, w-wait. What are they thinking!!”

As Maar took a quick glance at the freighter’s propulsion, she ended up opening her eyes wide. Without lowering its speed, it was continuing straight on, positioning itself on a straght collision course with the enemy.

“If they hit at that speed, they’re not getting out unscathed!”

Unlike with blaster attacks, energy shields were practically useless when it came to physical impact. By their difference in weight, the WIND would definitely be pulverized, but the freighter wouldn’t get off lightly. The ship closed the distance in no time. Maar closed her eyes at the impending destruction.

“... The hell?”

What Maar saw as she timidly opened her eyes was the form of the freighter continuing its advance as if nothing had happened at all. Letting out a voice of amazement at just how sturdy its armor had been build, she concentrated her attention on the remaining WIND vessel.

“Looks like I’ll live another day... hah... I’m saved...”

Confirming the last WIND go up in flames, she let her limbs hang limp. Danger was all part of a salvager’s trade, but she had a strong wish never to go through anything like that again.

—

“O-ow... damn, I hope we didn’t break anythin’.”

Tarou carried his aching body, as he began pushing his way through the items that had been thrown around just like him.

“Koume! Where are you! Found... no, that’s not it. I might use it later, so I’ll put that aside... ah, there you are. Koume, you alright?”

Tarou spotted Koume in the wreckage and went to wipe off the half-eaten spaghetti that she had gotten herself stuck in.

“Yes, I am fine, Mister Teirow. But saying our shape looks similar, and mistaking a self-pleasement product for me is exceedingly insulting. I demand an apology and reparations.”

“Yeah, you can have all of that later. So how’s the ship? We didn’t open up a hole, did we?”

Tarou brought Koume over to the display again, and plugged her cable into the jack. After a while, the moniter came on, and he got a close-up view of the

point of impact.

“... No, just a minor dent. Just what is this ship made out of? We must have been clocking a hundred kilometers there.”

Tarou raised a fed-up voice at the wreckage stuck to the hull, and the minor dent in the exterior. Koume flickered her lights atop Tarou’s hand.

“That was not in a league of hundreds, Mister Teirow. Our relative velocity was 2324kmph. Good thing this is such a sturdy ship. If possible, I ask you discuss these sorts of things with me beforehand.”

“Sorry,” Tarou waved his hand in response to Koume’s order. He changed the display window to show the shoddy ship that was still in combat.

“Oh, looks like they’re finishing up over there. And wait, are they really alright? They’re really burning up over there.”

The ship’s body was gradually scorched red from the WIND’s attacks. In some places, some gas had likely ignited. He could see flames streaming out violently.

“I do not know, but Mister Teirow. A communication line has been opened. Will you answer it?”

Unable to comprehend Koume’s words, Tarou froze up for a moment. After letting the meaning soak into his head, “Uwwaaahh!!” he raised a strange voice.

“Communication line! Y-you mean a phone!? Patch us through. I’m beggin’ you!!”

Koume silently flashed her lights. After a while, a woman’s voice that clearly didn’t belong to her came from the body of the sphere.

“This is space craft Rockboy. Registration Number IB-4980. I’m grateful for your ship’s assistan—”

“P-please save me!! I don’t have an engine! At this rate, I’m going to become a scrap of space refuse!!”

“... What? I just confirmed your warp drive. What are you talking about?”

Tarou sensed the woman’s voice turn doubtful, but he felt some relief as he saw her set course towards the ship.

“Thank you... no, I’ll tell you the specifics. But for now, I’d really like some help...”

After managing those words out, Tarou powerlessly fell down on the spot. In all his joy, his hands were shaking.

Chapter 09

“Um, how should I put this... if everything you said is true, to be honest, it’s all way too suspicious. I don’t want to get involved.”

“I know, right? Can’t say I didn’t see it coming.”

Tarou hung his head at the voice coming in through the communication line, but his heart was filled with delight. He was talking to another human he’d never thought he’d be able to meet, and the first human he’d encountered in a year.

“Is there anything I can do about my lack of family register and ship registration?”

He had gone with the flow and told her everything about his current circumstance, but now he regretted it. Perhaps he should have thought over it, choosing carefully what to say. Even if he didn’t lie, perhaps he should have avoided saying things that would put him at a disadvantage.

“Hah? You can do whatever you want to your register and registration as long as you have the credit. The problem here is your overdrive device, and the four thousand deaths. No matter how you look at it, this ship wasn’t conducting any honest trade.”

“No, the bodies were consigned to the abyss of space, you know? They were detached alongside the cargo hold, and there’s nothing left. By Koume’s calculations, they’ll run straight into a star in about twenty thousand years. Can’t we just pray for their happiness in their next life?”

“Well that’s just swell... it was an emergency, so I know there wasn’t any helping it, but you’re quite a piece of work.”

Maar let out a tired voice. “Anyways,” she continued on.

“As thanks for saving me, I’ll tow you to the station, but please do the rest on your own. For a ship of that size, the parking fee will be nothing to laugh at, and

more than anything, I don't want to be found by the inspectors. My selling point's my honest business ethic."

"EEEEeh... don't be like that. Help a brother out here, Maar-tan. I'm penniless here, and I don't know left from right."

"What's Maar-tan supposed to mean..."

"If you don't help me, I might just say all sorts of things. Like Maar-tan the salvager might have been my accomplice."

"H-hey! Don't say that, even as a joke!!"

"It's not like I have anything to lose. Hehehe, I'll do it. I'll do it all."

"... That's quite a personality you have there. But no. My principle is to not take on any jobs that won't make me anything."

Tarou raised a groan at Maar's obstinate tone. There, the third party who'd remained a spectator to that point entered the fray.

"I have a proposal. Will you lend an ear, Miss Maar?"

"Um, I don't mind, but who might you be? I heard there was only one crew member."

"My apologies, Miss Maar. I am Mister Teirow's personal possession. I go by Koume. Pleasure to be of your acquaintance."

"Stop it!! No matter how you take it, that'll cause a misunderstanding, so stop with that phrasing!!"

Tarou hurriedly knocked on Koume, but Koume ignored it and continued on.

"First off, the ownership rights to this ship definitely belong to Mister Teirow. I and the imperial government shall guarantee it. From the various records on-board the ship, I can assert we have enough positive proof to pass a trial."

"Yeah, so I heard. Go on."

"Yes, Miss Maar. By the way, Miss, did you happen to witness when this ship collided with the WIND craft? Regardless of that violent impact, this ship's armoring only suffered a minor dent, and is still in good health."

"Right, I saw it. Hey, so what's that sh—"

“Black Metal Type IN.”

Koume interrupted Maar words. Tarou hadn't the slightest idea what she was talking about, but he could hear Maar gulping on the other side of the line.

“Don't leave me in the dark, Koume-chan. What is that Black Metal thing?”

“Yes, Mister Teirow. It is an alloy produced by mixing carbon fiber into a metal like titanium through a special process. Strong, pliable, with a high conductivity for energy shields. If you ignore the difficulty of manufacturing it, it is the ideal metal for armoring.”

“Hmm, I knew it was kinda hard. So that's how it is. What about the IN part?”

Tarou's answer came not from Koume, but from across the line.

“IN stands for Imperial Navy. It's made for use by the fleet of the galactic empire. Honestly, I want to get involved with the matter even less.”

“Yes, that may be true. But Miss Maar.”

Unbefitting an AI, she spoke almost as if reading her opponent's feelings.

“It is exceptionally valuable.”

She would say no more. The conversation between the three came to an end, and a while of silence went by.

“..... I've lost. How much?”

Maar let out a tired sigh. Tarou clenched his fist in victory as he opened his mouth.

“Whatever price you want. You won't get anywhere betting on my complete lack of sense for monetary value, after all!! Hehehe!!”

“Eeeh!? What are you so proud about? And wait, throwing it all to your negotiations partner, are you messed up in the head?”

“Affirmative, Miss Maar.”

“Hey, negative that one, Koume-chan!!”

“Hah... very well. Then I'll take enough to shoulder the cost of Rocky's repairs. How does that sound? It definitely won't be cheap.”

“Sure, why not.”

“..... Dude. You’re deeeefinitely going to be tricked by some bad guy down the line.”

The dumbfounded voice he could hear over the line ended with the noise of the call cutting off. Tarou held up his hands, standing to his full height as he let out a cry of delight.

—

... Begin Docking Approach...

A large warning was displayed at the top of his BISHOP interface. His heart taken in by the giant space station that grew closer by the second, he continued operating the delicate position functions he needed to dock the ship.

“It’s huge... a hundred times bigger than I had imagined...”

By Tarou’s memory, the cylindrical space station expanding before his eyes more closely resembled the concept called a space colony. It didn’t have any glass faces, but its main body was coated in solar panels, with docking bridges extending in all directions from it. On the wharfs, countless ships were parked, and here and there, various crafts of all shapes and sizes flew in and out.

“Mister Teirow, we have just received information from the station. It seems this Alba Station is a mid-sized station that holds an approximate population of 6,000,000. There is a stargate nearby, so it’s used as a stopover point on journeys between major planets.”

“So this is mid-sized... wait, people live on the station?”

“... I do not understand the implications of the question, Mister Teirow. 98% of the population of the galactic empire live in the residential areas of stations. Is that not self-evident?”

“Eeeh!? So we’re all full-blown aliens. This goes beyond the level of a culture shock!”

... Warning, please use the designated automatic approach program...

“Ah, yes. Thanks for that. But this ship doesn’t have an engine, so I can’t use the program you gave me.”

Tarou gave a retort to the troublesome warning signal displayed in the back of his eyes. He was hectically using the constantly updated information he had on the ship to finely tune the direction control jets.

... Warning revoked, please normalize your route...

Calculating from its mass, Tarou put all the directional jets towards braking. From the start, he had been moving at a tortoise's pace, and his speed now dropped even further.

... Warning, please use the designated automatic landing program...

"No, as I was saying, this ship ain't got no engine, dammit!! And wait, we don't even have any landing legs!!"

Half-way to snapping, Tarou shouted out. After running the final jet propulsion for a brief instant, he cut it right when the ship's relative velocity to the station reached zero. Meaning he had come to a complete stop.

... Docking complete. Welcome to Alba Station...

"Thank you," Tarou muttered as he watched a number of thin wires extend from the station bridge on his display. Eventually, a snake-like tube slithered out, joining to the exit door of his ship.

"Good work. Hey, what was that back there? That looked like quite an unsteady docking. Did you have it on manual control?"

Maar's voice came from Koume.

"Yeah, that was probably manual. I don't really get it, but I just updated the program along the way."

"... I'm sorry, I don't really get what you're saying."

"No, I mean I just made a landing program along the way. There was no helping it. I mean, it's already dubious whether this hunk of metal can even be called a ship at this point."

"... Um, you mean you coded it in real time? No way... could it be you're a Gift holder?"

"Gift? Sorry baby. If you want a present, you're going to have to do with my

body.”

“... Whatever. I’ll go get you, so just wait. You probably don’t even know how to walk yet, right?”

“How to walk? I’ve been walkin’ for close to twenty years!!”

Finding Maar’s tone somewhat rude, Tarou threw in a retort, but in just a few minutes, he found himself in a situation where he could only agree.

He had completely forgotten the zero gravity space that expanded before him the moment he left the ship.

Chapter 10

“Whaaaaaah, h-help, kersplat!?!”

Within that weightless space, Tarou spun forwards as e collided with the wall. Just like that, he bounced as he floated towards the ceiling. Perhaps in the same principle a billiards ball ricochets off a cushion.

“Mister Teirow. I do not care if you make merry, but at this rate, we will never reach the station.”

“E’en ‘f ‘ya tell me that, hey, stop, argh!!”

Even as his knees crumbled at the terrible impact, he somehow used his limbs to absorb the force and land on the ground. To make sure he didn’t spin away again, he crept along the station bridge. While he looked considerably creepy, safety was of a higher priority.

“Wait, Teirow. That lock is... eek! I feel sick.”

Beyond an automatic sliding door was a woman in a suit looking down on Tarou. Even if you called it a suit, it wasn’t the sort of thing he was used to seeing businessmen wearing, it was something made with orange as the base color. Through her smoke-tinted helmet that covered her head, it was difficult to confirm her expression, but she was likely making quite a fed-up face as she observed Tarou.

“... Hmm, humanity isn’t ready for this means of movement yet.”

“Yeah... right. Honestly, I’m shocked.”

“Don’t praise me so,” Tarou bashfully laughed as he stood with good momentum. That force sent him into the emptiness again. Remembering the pain he felt last time his head was hit, he braced himself, but Maar promptly grabbed him by the leg, letting him survive without issue.

“I was half in doubt, but you really are a planet dweller... no way any sensible station-raised man would do something so stupid. It’s a good thing that there’s

a roof here, but if we were in the atrium, you'd be space refuse."

Keeping her hold on Tarou's foot, Maar pulled on a wire running town the wall to drag him back in the right direction. It seems there were various wires running at various speeds lining the wall, and Maar swiftly changed between wires to steadily accelerate.

"So instead of a moving walk, you have a moving handrail? Um, Maar-san? Aren't we going a bit too fast!!? I still have a problem with my positioning, and I'm crazy scared over heeeerre!!"

As Maar grabbed the highest wire, Tarou experienced an acceleration so strong he thought his leg would rip off.

"Now look here, just how many kilometers do you think it is from the bridge to the station? If we dilly dally, there won't be any day left."

He was still face up towards the corridor. Pulled down it at a speed as if he was falling. He almost lost control of his bowels over the fear, but his chest was filled with a warm exhilaration. Before his eyes was a human who would respond if he let out words. And there were other people passing by in that endless corridor.

—

"..... You're beautiful."

Inside the station. His unsteady body finally reaching somewhere with active gravity, Tarou spoke out as he saw Maar's face outside of its helmet. Green eyes, and red hair. An orderly nose line, and wide eyes. Her stature was low, but the body line he could see from the tight-fitting suit was a wonderful thing.

"You think? Thank you. But coming from an iceman, well..."

"Iceman?"

"People like you who've woken up from a long cold sleep. Wait there a bit. I'll go register your ship, and get a census form for you. Pardon me."

As Maar said that, she casually plucked one of Tarou's hairs. Gazing at it dubiously, she started off towards some sort of computing terminal.

"Oww, say something first... but I see. So it's DNA registration. And wait, you

can get a registry that easily?”

He hadn't directed those words to anyone in particular, but Koume suspended from his belt gave an answer.

“Affirmative, Mister Teirow. The galactic empire's neural network preserves the DNA information of every resident registered to it. If the DNA in your hair does not match any other entry, it will automatically create a record for you without any issue.”

To Koume's words, “Wow,” Tarou gave a thoughtful reply. He didn't know much about the term Neural Network, but he imagined it as something like the internet.

“But this is a crazy amount of people... 's it that? Something like an airport gate?”

“Yes, I think that comparison is correct, Mister Teirow. Until you cross over that gate, you cannot strictly say you are inside the station.”

“I see. So it's like that. On the other hand, as long as I don't cross over it, they don't care whether I have a registry or not?”

“Correct, Mister Teirow. It's common that people who don't have a registry due to various circumstance carry out their business and exchanges here. They are still charged a docking fee, so it is not a bad deal for the station. They do not cause any trouble, and they do not use up resources. They are exemplary customers.”

After letting out a sigh of admiration, Tarou observed the people restlessly moving about. He didn't see any octopus-like lifeforms or little gray men. The only difference from earth he could see was a truly wide abundance of skin, eye and hair color.

“It's a bit of a letdown... I was expecting some insectoid aliens 'r somethin'.”

“Are you talking about arthropodians, Mister Teirow? In that case, it is not as if they do not exist in imperial territory, but they are not a common sight in this star system.”

“So they exist!! For real!?”

While he was just told they were not a common sight, Tarou looked around nervously with slight expectations. Of course, he didn't find what he was looking for, but he was able to spot humans growing wings and horns.

"Really no joke... Whoah, Koume-san, Koume-san. Could that possibly be a robot?"

At the end of Tarou's outstretched finger was a lustrous metallic body belonging to a supposed robot man. His face made of a real mold looked exceedingly human, but his elbow and knee joints consisted of exposed mechanisms, and every time he moved, they showed a smooth, steady operation.

"Yes, most likely, Mister Teirow. If it was made with organic materials, it would be properly classified as a cyborg, but that is probably a robot. From what I can see, its body is the latest model. I find myself envious."

As Koume said that, she tried spinning the wheels Tarou had made for her.

"I... see... you're right, that sort of body may be best for you. I'm sorry you're so shoddy. Right, when I get money for selling the ship, I'll buy you a body like that."

"... Thank you, Mister Teirow. But I shall make do with the sentiment. That is an exceedingly expensive item. There are numerous other places you ought to be spending your money."

"No, but you know... ah, she's back."

Tarou spotted Maar in the corner of his eye, lightly raising a hand.

"Alright, here's a ship registration, and a family registration card. With this, you're an imperial citizen like the rest of us. Also, I don't want to keep up this complicit relationship, so I'll have you sign this. A sales contract between you and me."

Tarou received a black chip in his raised hand.

"What's this? An SD?"

"Wrong. Wait, just what ancient era did you come from? That's called a pulse chip... ah, whatever. Let me see it for a second."

Maar painstakingly took the chip from Tarou, pressing it flat against his forehead. He obediently followed her order to, “Startup BISHOP,” and he was able to confirm a Sales Contract function had been added on.

“Like that, the chip can send data directly as brainwaves. You might already know, but BISHOP functions aren’t all just programs. Databases are also treated as functions. They’re stored as temporary memory, so you can’t do something like load a dictionary, thought.”

“How convenient,” Tarou leisurely replied, as he scanned through the contents of the contract he had received. The contents were pretty much just the verbal promise they had already exchanged put into official terms, so they were neither advantageous nor disadvantageous to Tarou.

“How do I... ah, I see. Just link the signature function and sign. Ok, ok. Koume, I don’t really get contracts, but is this one alright? I won’t be charged for some exorbitant sum later? You’re the one who signed the document!! She’ll say?”

“You have watched too many movies, Mister Teirow. And you can only obtain pulse chip data through direct contact. Could you sent that data over to me?”

“Ah, that so? Oh, wait that sounds about right. Otherwise, info’d leak all over the place... here.”

Tarou peeled off the chip stuck to his forehead, and put it against Koume’s lights.

“... Yes, that is enough, Mister Teirow. There does not seem to be a problem with the contents of the contract. If I had to say, then the payment imposed on Miss Maar, ‘Assistance with pressing daily necessities’, is too vague for my liking. But taking Miss Maar’s character into account, it seems trustworthy enough. Right, Miss Maar?”

Koume’s tone was composed. As Maar returned it a bitter smile, Tarou offered Koume’s body— strapped to his waist— a few gentle pats.

“You’re much more proficient than you owner. Next time, I’ll write up a contract that properly spells out my duties. Is that alright?”

“Yes, of course, Miss Maar. You really are a person worthy of trust.”

As Maar made a smile, Koume's voice was as expressionless as ever.
But Tarou felt from her voice that the sphere really was enjoying herself.

Chapter 11

A room in the space station. With that room Tarou saw as around the size of a school gymnasium, the figures of one man and one woman surrounded a mountainous pile of scrap metal.

“Hey, Teirow. I want to remove this part, can you do something about it?”

Maar raised her face from the pile of scraps. Tarou raised his own face from the children’s picture book he had been reading, walking over to Maar as he started up BISHOP.

“Another code, huh... yeah, yeah, I’ll do it, so don’t make such a scary face. By the way, this might be a stupid question, but why do is there an encryption set whenever a ship part is joined?”

Tarou looked through the numerous password programs in his BISHOP space, decrypting them as he asked.

“Why? I mean, it’s dangerous if you don’t do it, right? If a part falls off in the middle of a voyage, there’s a possibility it could lead to a major accident.”

“Ah, no, no. I know that. I’m trying to say, isn’t it strange for it to be made so you have to use software to dismantle the hardware? You sure it’s not a fault?”

“You think? It seems military ships and the like are made that way for secrecy, but generally, isn’t it because people prioritize ease of maintenance? If it’s joined through hardware, detaching things is quite some work, but if it’s through BISHOP, it takes no time at all.”

“Hmm... come to think of it, your Rockyboy got to mint condition in the blink of an eyes. Did ya’ just swap out the parts, and call it a day?”

“That’s right. I’m having the broken parts slowly repaired, and once they’re good as new, I’ll use them as spares. In space, the slightest accident spells life and death, so most ships generally have spare parts loaded onto them.”

“I see... right, voilà.”

Tarou snapped his fingers. And at the same time, the ship component in front of Maar detached and fell, exposing its internal parts.

“It’s as unfair as ever, your BISHOP... or rather your brain. If you put in a request to an unlocksmith, it usually takes around three days, you know? At this point, why not find a job as a thief?”

“Hmhm, the only thing I’ll ever steal is a woman’s heart.”

“Yeah, yeah, keep it down, virgin.”

“I-! I-I ain’t no virgin!!”

“N-no. That was a joke... ah, this circuit’s still alive!!”

From the detached part, Maar pulled out a chip about the size of her fist, glowing like the light of a sun.

“It’s the auxiliary equipment of the drive for a large-scale freighter, so it’ll fetch quite a hefty sum. It’s enough to pay your salary for the week.”

Maar grinned as she looked at the stripped chip. Taken in by it, Tarou returned a smile.

“Oh, that’s good... but you salvagers sure have it hard. Having to do such plain work day after day, if it were me, I wouldn’t last a day.”

It had been around half a month since Tarou began living in at Maar’s workplace. Hearing her work was salvaging parts from scrap ships, at first his heart raced. But contrary to his expectations, the essence of the job largely consisted of monotonous dismantling.

“That goes without saying. Our assigned scraps are already determined, so we don’t have too many opportunities to go out into space. It’s mostly hit and miss, and more than anything, the large ships are all sent to Corp.”

“Corp? Who’s that?”

“The Corporation. She is referring to a company, Mister Teirow.”

The two turned towards the voice they heard from the hill of scrap iron. After a while, Koume’s form appeared, climbing over it.

“Good work, Koume. How are things on your side?”

At the top of the pile, Koume flashed her lights.

“Things are proceeding smoothly, Miss Maar. I have successfully made a catalogue of everything that looks to be sellable. Mister Teirow, I sill confirm it once more, but you really plan on selling everything but the ship’s core?”

“You betcha. Just selling the other portions’ll fetch quite some money, right?”

“Yes, though that depends on your definition of quite a sum, Mister Teirow. I think it will likely make for enough money that you could play around for the rest of your life.”

“... Yes? Eh? No way. That much?”

Ignoring Tarou’s surprise, Koume displayed a precise amount. As Tarou had only treated that ship as oversized garbage to that point, he felt complete shock as he compared the sum to the price of a meal. Looking over him, Maar breathed out a sigh.

“Now look here... let me ask it like this. In your ancient times, was everyone rich enough to have one cruiser-class ship per house?”

On Maar’s words, Tarou ended up nodding. The values here were too far off from earth, so it was difficult for him to get a sense for them, but he imagined it something like a large private cruise ship for the rich.

“How could this be. Before I e’en noticed it, I’ve gotten to a position where I c’n fulfill my lifelong dream of slapping someone with a wad of bills!!?”

“Looks like it... I don’t intend to get in the way of your hobbies, but do it to me and I’ll smack you.”

“With pleasure!”

“With a wrench.”

“I’m sorry!”

Tarou nimbly performed a dogeza. He himself didn’t understand why he had to dogeza at all, but for some reason, he ended up doing it by reflex.

“By the way, Mister Teirow. With so much money in your hands, what do you intend to do? Will you live your live without any clear goal, clinging onto your

parent's legs, while the neighbors whisper about you as the disgrace of the house? Koume will not particularly do anything to stop you."

"At that point, just honestly say NEET!! And you totally intend to stop me, don't you!!"

"I'm also a bit interested. Are you going to invest it or something?"

On Maar's words, "Even if you ask me that, all of a sudden..." Tarou scratched his head.

"In the first place, I don't have the basic knowledge to form any greed... ah, but I do have somethin' I wanna do."

The two sent eyes full of intrigue to Tarou's words. After putting his hand on his chin in thought, he gave quite a natural response.

"I want to search for the earth. And I'll need a ship."

The words from his mouth left Maar dumbfounded. And Koume kept her silence.

"A real huge one at that."

—

"When you said ship market, you know. How should I put this, I was imagining some super huge trade-fair sort of deal. Little Teirow-chan is a bit disappointed."

"You're kinda irritating me... more importantly. Are you sure you're not going to reconsider it? No one knows whether the planet called earth really exists or not."

The exhibition hall of the station's ship market. Ships of all shapes and sizes were projected in holograph, and the two of them walked casually alongside a great number of customers.

"No, no, it exists. That's comin' from someone born and raise there, so there's no doubt about it."

"I'm sure that some sort of mistake. The galactic empire has existed for over five thousand years, but it still has yet to be confirmed, you know?"

“I mean, even if you tell me that... ah, but what about that thing? I heard it remained in folklore.”

“Yeah, what you’re talking about is probably the common planet descent theory of humankind, but rather than science, that’s practically in the domain of religion.”

Quite obstinate against him buying a ship, Maar was hanging on incessantly. Without paying it any mind, Tarou continued gazing at the ships on display. His eyes stopped on one of them. A large vessel with a streamlined body

“Ah, this one’s badass. And more ‘n anythin’, it’s huge. That’s how it is, so what says you, Koume-sensei?”

Tarou turned his eyes to the sphere hung at his belt. She flashed her lights as usual.

“That is a DD-E559, a model called a Thunderbolt. While it will not be a problem with your finances, what exactly do you plan to fight, boarding a destroyer like that?”

Tarou thought a bit over Koume’s words.

“Hey, Maar. About those WIND things we fought some time ago. Can you find them all o’er the place?”

On Tarou’s words, “Let’s see,” Maar replied.

“They’re generally dispersed all throughout the galaxy, but... if you really plan on searching for an unknown planet, then you’ll have to go out to the outer reaches of space. In that case, you’ll be up against more humans than WIND.”

“Humans? Is that where the criminals go?”

“Umm, it’s dubious whether you can call them criminals or not. The outer reaches are outside the galactic empire’s sphere of influence, so that place is generally a lawless zone. If there’s no law, it would be difficult to call anything a crime, right?”

“Wow, we really are at the fin-de-siècle... but I see. All the places humans can live on normally have long since been found.”

Tarou raised his face, looking at the window installed on the exhibition room

wall. In that space where air didn't exist, a number of stars you could call beyond count gave a dazzling twinkle.

“... Well, having more places to look just fires me up more.”

Even Tarou knew it was a rash flight of foolishness from his own ignorance, but it's not like he didn't have any prospects. He himself undoubtedly had memories of his life on earth, and at the very least, there was the fact he was able to come here. And more than anything...

“Koume, when we get back, access the neural network, and investigate a bit into earth-like exoplanets. There can't be too many 'f them, right?”

“Yes, understood. But I cannot give an affirmative, Mister Teirow. By earth-like, you likely mean planets capable of human inhabitation, but even in this galactic system alone...”

... He had a reassuring ally with him.

Chapter 12

A giant asteroid drifting through space, and a broken spaceship crashed into its tip. Tarou sat in the deputy seat of the Rockboy supporting up that ship as he gazed at his BISHOP display. The front of the Rockboy's cockpit was airframe, with a glass dome... actually made of hardened resin... over the top. To Tarou's side— meaning the driver's seat— he could see Maar concentrating.

“Stand by... stand by..... now!!”

Timing himself to Maar's voice, Tarou manipulated the functions of the Rockboy's frame. Willing the Rockboy the yank the wire wrapped around it, the ship sunken into the asteroid misshapenly bent back and forth as it tried to come free.

“Airframe output and physical shield output are both stable. You can safely raise the output by 20%, Mister Teirow.”

Plugged into the Rockboy's control panel, Koume flashed her lights as she spoke. Tarou hummed a tune as he increased the output, skillfully pulling the wires with a force that exceeded the specs listed in the ship's catalogue.

“... Okay, stop!! Now we just have to sever it with the arms, and that'll be the end of it. Good work, both of you. We've gotten our first big haul in a long while.”

Letting out a deep breath at Maar's voice, Tarou leaned back into his chair.

“Let's get out of here fast. Even if we have a shield, there's still that million-to-one chance, right?”

“Yes, that's right. Bomb disposal is something they really should have left to a professional, but... okay, it's out.”

Maar turned her eyes to the outside. The front part of the wrecked ship slowly floated away with the asteroid.

“But how did the asteroid-destroyer ship crash into an asteroid itself? Some

new-age kamikaze?”

Maar laughed as she answered Tarou’s complaints.

“I don’t know what this kamikaze is, but it is ironic. Whatever the case, isn’t it fine? The energy from its collision diverted the asteroid’s trajectory, after all. And more than anything, it put some food on an honest salvager’s table.”

“Miss Maar. I apologize for being so forward, but rejoicing over the misfortune of others is... Miss Maar, please accelerate the ship at once. The force of the detachment has begun to reactivate some of the explosive devices.”

On Koume’s words, time in the cockpit came to a momentary halt. In the next instant, “Recalculate!!” Maar cried, and “Leave it to me!!” a voice cried back.

“Oy, oy, oy, that’s no joke. We really should’ve given up on this job!!”

“Sss-shut it!! The pay was wonderful!!”

Taking the tension of the wires into account, Tarou quickly calculated the best position to be, and immediately sent the results of her calculations to Koume. Receiving them, Koume added in a factor of the ship’s remaining energy supply, and transferred it to Maar. Marr used her long years of experience, alongside the Rockboy’s tendencies, and the behavior of the scrap to steer the ship in the most appropriate way she saw possible.

“Adriaaan!!?”

The sudden strong acceleration slammed Tarou against his seat. The anti-g-force suit constricted against his body in a desperate attempt to keep blood flowing in his brain.

In the next instant, a flash erupted to burn his eyes out. That grainy impact wave that expanded in a sphere.

“The... anti-de... bris...”

“Miss Maar, leave that to me.”

While Maar’s voice was strained by the same acceleration Tarou experienced, Koume gave a calm answer. She quickly activated the 8 anti-debris beams loaded onto the Rockboy, incinerating the asteroid fragments flying towards the

ship.

“A big one’s... com...ing... goddammittt!!”

Tarou screamed as he used BISHOP. He regulated the Rockboy down a course to avoid a fragment likely too large for the lasers to burn through. Around when he thought he’d lose consciousness at the g-force on his body increasing even further from the curve, numerous large fragments passed right next to the ship.

“Erk... urgh... a-are we in the clear!?”

The ship stopped its acceleration, and Tarou was finally free from the clamping. As the blood came down from his head, he felt an intense sense of vertigo.

“Yes... somehow. The asteroid’s been successfully detonated, so the environmental sector of the station will pay us extra.”

“That’s good... hey, Maar. It’s going to be exposed soon enough, so I’ll be honest and say I wet myself a bit.”

“I see... don’t worry. So did I.”

“That so... hehe.”

“That’s right... fufu.”

The relief from their safety caused the two to raise voices of laughter.

“Should I have spilled some machine oil as well?”

On Koume’s voice, the two wrung out even more laughter. Kicking their feet in that narrow cockpit, carelessly throwing around their arms.

“Geez, I laughed so much my stomach hurts... hey, you. You really should give up on searching for earth after all. I’m sure we could make a good team.”

Maar suddenly changed to a serious tone. “Perhaps,” Tarou returned, but he folded his arms and turned away.

“Tell ‘ya the truth here, I don’t quite get it myself... even ‘f I find earth ‘n go home, there’s no way the place’ll be the same earth I know.”

“Then all the more...”

Tarou gazed out at the stars outside the window. "But see," he continued.

"I have to return, or 'ow should I put it. I feel somethin' like a sense of duty... it's a bit difficult to explain. Should I call it the best place to bury my bones? When it really comes down to it, I'm an outsider here, and an iceman."

On Tarou's words, "I see..." said Maar. She folded her arms as he did, turning her eyes to the stars of the cosmos.

"The station doesn't have a burial custom, so I don't really understand... hey, what sort of place was the earth?"

"Even if you ask me what sort of place it was... first, it had an ocean. Around seventy percent of its surface was ocean. On the remaining thirty percent, the humans and animals lived cramped together, and at the very least, back when I was still there, there was a lot of nature remaining."

"Seventy percent ocean... that's way too inefficient. Wasn't it ever terraformed?"

"By terraform, you mean that thing where they control the whole environment of a planet? Never. Humanity didn't have that technology yet. Within that naturally-made environment, they were trying their best not to destroy it. Being eco-friendly and stuff."

"Hmm," Maar sounded doubtful. Tarou sent her a sidelong glance as he continued on.

"You could barely see the stars through the atmosphere, but in their place, we had a sky, and we could see the sunrise and sunset. I never went to them, but we had deserts and jungles too. Places covered in permafrost, and tropics where you could survive naked. Even where I lived, if you went a bit away, there were still mountains and rivers brimmin' with nature."

"Hmm... that's quite different from the planets terraformed to a specific biosphere. It's like they just stuffed a bunch of things together, a chaotic environment. Have you ever been to the rivers or mountains? They weren't dangerous?"

"Dangerous? As long as you exercised adequate caution, you wouldn't be in much danger. If you go to the mountains, you'll lots of rivers, and when I was

small, I'd play around them all the time. I don't know how it is now, but they were clean enough you could just drink them like that."

"Drink? You mean the river water? As is? Without any processing? What's with that. You were living on a gold mine!"

"Gold... oh, I see. Water's a valuable on the station... but if we get into that, I don't see it endin'. We had hundreds, thousands of types of plants, and we had real livestock. Not that synthesized stuff where you can't tell what it was originally made from. The real deal."

Maar was desperately working her imagination to put together Tarou's words. A wrinkle graced her brow as she looked into the distance.

"Then what about you place? What sort of house did you live in?"

"The houses really depended on where you lived, but they were generally stone or wood. I guess reinforced concrete counts as stone. Ours was a normal two-story wood house, though."

"Wood!? What sort of estate was it!?"

Maar cried out.

"Umm, then what's this? You drank real mineral water, as you ate real meat and plants. And on top of all that, you lived in a dwelling made of wood? That's absurd. No wonder you'd want to go home... what sort of paradise is that?"

"Ah, no. That's not particularly why I want to go back..."

Tarou hurriedly said it, but Maar seemed to be immersed in her own thoughts, and she wasn't listening.

"You think... you think it really exists?"

Maar muttered.

"As I was tellin' you, I don't just 'Think' it, it really exists. I don't know where it is, and what's become of it now. But at the very least, it undoubtedly exists. Because that's where I came from."

On Tarou's words, Maar thought some more.

"... Hey, Koume. I'm just asking for reference, but what do you think?"

Koume, who had persisted in silence to that point, flickered her lights for the first time in a while.

“Yes, Miss Maar. I am unable to determine whether it exists or not, but I do think it is a highly credible story. All the knowledge and common sense Mister Teirow possesses match up with records of premodern times, and surprisingly enough, they all hold a sense of consistency. That would not be the case with a delusion or scam. And I do have something I can call sufficient evidence.”

At Koume’s words, the two showed expressions of shock. Koume spun her wheels as she continued.

“The first is the language Mister Teirow initially used. The ancient language called Japanese only exists within the studies of a small portion of language scholars, and it is not a standard language. No matter how vast the galactic empire may be, it would be nigh impossible to find anyone who spoke it fluently. And the other...”

The two swallowed their breath.

“... is DNA information. Mister Teirow’s DNA... if you will pardon my discourtesy, I had it examined, and it contained the base information for all humanity living within the present empire. All of them, from the winged, to those called subspecies. Do you understand what that would mean?”

On that unbelievable notion, time on the ship stopped.

“The common planet descent theory of humankind. Perhaps it wasn’t completely wrong.”

Chapter 13

“You can’t find a buyer? Does that sort of thing really happen?”

Tarou dropped his spanner in surprise. “That’s dangerous,” Maar said as she picked it up.

“Well of course it can happen. Business is something that can only hold true when you have a buyer and a seller. In this station out in the sticks, there’s no way you’d find anyone wanting of a military-grade armored deck. When you think about it, it’s obvious... to be honest, that was an oversight on my part.”

Tarou took the spanner from Maar, returning to dismantling the scrap parts.

“I see... now that you mention it, you do ‘ave a point. Like ‘ow you won’t get any buyers sellin’ machine guns door-to-door in a peaceful village.”

“Your comparison’s a bit off, but something like that. You’ll have to go where there are more people, or where the need is higher to sell it. It’s probably the army that would want it most, but if it comes to that, they’ll definitely question its origin.”

On Maar’s voice, “I’d rather not answer that one,” said Tarou. He didn’t think he had anything to feel guilty about, but if possible, he wanted to avoid trouble.

“See, this is the cosmic powers telling you to stay here. In the end, if an iceman who doesn’t even know how to walk in zero gravity goes out on a journey, he’ll only face setback after setback from his lack of common sense.”

Maar’s face was all smiles. Tarou pouted as he averted his face, but he knew Maar’s words weren’t completely off the mark.

“Well, when you really boil it down, that’s where the problem is... I think Koume’ll do somethin’ about that, to an extent, but that girl has some strange points of her own.”

“That is quite an allegation, Mister Teirow. I am nothing more than an artificial intelligence, and not a human. As an AI, I consider myself exceedingly

common sensical.”

“That’s a lie! Like ‘ell there are AI like you all over the place!!”

“That really is quite an allegation. Don’t you feel sorry for Koume?”

“No, no, just listen to this, Maar-tan. She’s terrible. Just the other day, she...”

The three seemed to have opened up to one another. At a glance, it looked to be nothing more than their hellishly peaceful everyday life, but Tarou felt some restlessness somewhere in his being. It was probably not his imagination, and he knew Maar surely felt it too.

“... And that’s what she said. Don’t you think she’s terrible?”

“Fufu, that was your fault. Now then, it’s about time.”

On Maar’s words, Tarou confirmed the time display on his BISHOP. It signified the time his work shift was over, and usually, it was even a time he would rejoice over.

“I see... then that’s the end. Three months went by in the blink of an eye, but it was fun. Was a real learnin’ experience, and I got paid for it properly.”

Giving a wink, Tarou removed his work gloves and held out his right hand. The new contract he had made with Maar specified daily support over a time period of three months, and today was the settled date.

“You really were a big help. I’m really thankful... um, if possible...”

Tarou made an unusually serious expression. To him, Maar raised her own hand a bit, but after a moment’s hesitation, she powerlessly lowered it.

“I can’t. I have no reason to help you.”

“Haha... well, that’s right...”

And awkward air and silence.

Eventually, Maar took her eyes off of Tarou, sending a sad glance towards the exit.

“I apologize for interrupting. Miss Maar, Mister Teirow. There is something I must apologize about.”

Could it be called timely salvation in that unbearable silence? With a slight

smile, “What is it now?” said Maar.

“Yes, Miss Maar. It is about the three month support contract I had you draft up. I had completely forgotten to receive Mister Teirow’s approval for it. A so-called ‘Slip-up’ on my part.”

On Koume’s voice, the two made blank expressions. What are you saying so late in the game, spoke Maar’s face, but finally noticing something, she seemed taken aback.

“I-I see. So even an AI of your caliber makes mistakes... it’s fine, don’t mind it... um... thank you”

“No the thanks and apology should come from me, Miss Maar. So I do apology, but the compensation imposed on Miss Maar is not daily support over a period of three months, it would be, ‘assistance with pressing daily necessities’.”

Having come so far, Tarou finally realized the situation. After a surprised look at Koume, he changed his eyes to Maar.

“S-see, just as I told you. She’s a strange one in ‘er own way. So we’ll be too anxious on our own. Truth is, I’d like to free you at once, but the contract, you see...”

“Yes, that’s right. If that’s the contract between us, then there’s no helping it... fufu, isn’t that right, Koume?”

“Yes, that is right, Miss Maar. From the ship parts we were able to sell, the Rockboy’s repair fees have long-since been paid off. At the present point, ceasing your life support of Mister Teirow would be a breach of contract.”

“That so,” said Maar quite unnaturally.

“I’d be troubled if the imperial government took me in for breach of contract. I won’t be able to pay my rent to the station, so they’ll take my Rocky away... um... well... I-I’ll just say it, but this is all for Rocky!! It’s definitely not for your sake or anything!!”

“I-I know. I get it... but thank you for that by-the-books line. I’m a bit moved that I was able to hear it in my lifetime.”

“What are you mumbling about... now look, let’s go.”

Maar grabbed Tarou’s still-extended hand and ran off.

“We have to draft a plan. I’m sure you think things will work themselves out as long as you have a ship, and haven’t put any decent thought into it, right? As I thought, you won’t make it without me.”

Her words hitting the mark, Tarou gave a bitter smile as he was pulled by the hand.

“If we’re doing this, we’re definitely going to find it.”

Somewhat overpowered, Tarou gave a strong grip of her hand in place of an answer.

—

“First, we’ll have to start a company.”

In a narrow office of the junk yard, the two humans and one robot faced one another.

“No, I’m sorry. I don’t see where this is going. What is this? Is the galactic empire so overbearin’ they won’t allow a single trip if it isn’t business-related?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“No matter how you look at it... wait, for real!!?”

Maar covered her ears at Tarou’s cry.

“It’s not as if the trip itself is forbidden, Mister Teirow. The problem is the time it would take, right Miss Maar?”

“Yes. If we’re going to move between star systems to search for earth, then we have no choice but to use the stargate. But if you enter the queue normally, you’ll be waiting a few months, or even years.”

“Years!? That’s more than a reservation on the finest luxury cruise. You tellin’ me to go into cold sleep or something?”

“Right, there are some people who do that.”

On Maar’s casually concluded, Tarou raised both his hands.

“Whoah... I want to quit being surprised already. But, well, from where this talk is going, is it that? Businesses get a fast pass?”

“Correct, Mister Teirow. Businesses are organizations that build the core of the galactic empire, so not only the stargate, you will get various forms of preferential treatment. At the same time, you’ll be given some obligations, but as long as you do not plan on going to the center systems, it would not be a problem.”

“Right. We’re going to the outer reaches, so it’ll probably be fine. With the gate, you could also send a bribe, but if possible, I’d like to keep that a last resort.”

“Well yeah, that’ll give them somethin’ to hold over us, after all... by the way, what’re these obligations? Do I have ta pay corporate tax?”

“Tax is pretty much the same for companies and individuals. More than that, if you make a large sum, you’ll have to pay more as an individual than a company. The obligation is government missions. Meaning you’ll have to do government issued jobs at regular intervals. Their contents vary, but honestly, you can also just resolve them by throwing money at the problems.”

On Maar’s words, Tarou imagined the choice-based quests you could often find in video games. But if the government was issuing them, then the fact you could resolve them with money came alongside a dreamless reality.

“Hmm... don’t really ‘ave a picture of government work. What sort of things are there? I can’t imagine it at all.”

To Tarou’s words, Maar thought a bit.

“Umm, generally, you have to help out the public offices. Even if you ask me what sort, there are various things... I guess the standard would be police duty?”

“Police? No, no, leave that one to the guys who do it for a living.”

“For a living? You mean the security companies?”

Maar really didn’t seem to get it. Tarou himself seemed confused as he continued on.

“Security company? Eh? Wait. You don’t have a police force? One the government funds with our taxpayer dollars. No police?”

“Nothing. And wait, if they did that, the empire would crumble from civil war. With a police force to look over 60 trillion people, it’ll obviously swell bigger than the army. What do you plan to do if they raised a rebellion?”

“60 trillion... I won’t be surprised. I won’t be surprised anymore.”

“By the way, Mister Teirow, the 60 trillion figure only includes the humankind with an official registry. It is thought the actual population is twice to several times that.”

“Wheh, which means, at least 120 trillion? It’s already that. The scale’s too off, I can’t grasp it at all. What’s with 120 trillion? The number of cells in my body?”

Rolling his eyes back, Tarou collapsed limply into his chair. Maar drew back as she watched over him.

“You are quite knowledgeable, Mister Teirow. But the number of cells in the human body is closer to 60 trillion.”

“Between me and Maar?”

“120 trillion. But that’s kinda gross, so stop it. Knowing there’s 60 trillion pieces of you is a bit...”

“A bit what, my dear? I’m real curious, but I’m also sure I don’t want to know... anyways, it’s just as Maar said. I’m way too oblivious.”

Experiencing his ignorance again, Tarou felt embarrassed over his own recklessness. “It’s a bit late for that,” said Maar, lightly poking him on the nose.

“A company, huh... what should we name it...”

On the words he quietly muttered, Maar began raising ideas.

The talk that followed carried on a while, and even after the station’s manmade night descended, there was no interruption to the office light. They never ran out of topics and themes to talk about.

Chapter 14

“But you know, man. If ‘ya keep pursuing convenience, you end up losin’ some of the flavor.”

The sale already finished, in a mere ten days, Maar’s workplace would be being used by some unknown stranger. Looking over the display with Maar, Tarou muttered.

“I agree with the contents of your words, words, but what are you talking about?”

Maar stopped her hand that had been scrolling down the screen.

“No, when you’re selecting these sorts of missions, you know. ‘Hey, haven’t seen yer face ‘round these parts. All the jobs we ‘ave ‘ere are E-Rank requests for newbies. Do yer best out there,’ I thought I’d be able to have that sort of conversation with a brawny old man.”

On Tarou’s words, Koume spoke from the belt that have become her primary position.

“It is not good to play too many games, Mister Teirow. And imposing the billions of requests scattered across the galactic empire onto the memory of an old man is a somewhat cruel methodology. If you want to look at it realistically, you would need several hundred million old men stacked up behind the counter.”

“Gross!! An’ wait, those old men should just go resolve the problems themselves!!”

“Oh, you’re talking about video games. I panicked a bit when I wondered if that’s how things went on earth... ah, how about this one? Transport chips from the Alba Station to the Aedes Station. It’s in the direction of the outer reaches, and chips won’t take up too much space.”

Tarou turned his eyes to the entry Maar pointed out. Just like the other

missions, it listed destination, reward, time period and order time. It also listed things to take note of with the contract. They were missions irrelevant to the obligations of a company, but they let one earn travel expenses on a journey. Meaning in order to secure funds for their earth hunt, they were requests Tarou's group should start assertively taking on.

"By stargate, Aedes Station is... umm, two stops up. The distance is around three lightyears? The distance to the outer reaches is around thirty thousand light years... wow, really makes you think."

"Fufu, that's right. But I don't think it's bad for the first step. And gathering info is our top priority, so there's no real need to circle aimlessly around the outer reaches. For now, let's set visiting the extra-large-class stations as our goal."

As Maar brought the matter to a close, she pushed the accept button on the display. A contract was immediately sent to her PC from the neural network, and she downloaded it as a pulse chip.

"Alright, here. It's the first job of the Rising Sun Corp, President."

With a broad grin, she presented the chip to Tarou. After he took it, Tarou raised his arms in an expression of intoxication.

"Fufu, very well... as the first step towards our glorious company's name roaring out all throughout the cosmos, let us complete this lowly request."

"What we're carrying is a large quantity of holograph porno chips geared towards men."

"So it's porn!!? Dammit, 'tis an irreplaceable duty of granting dreams to the masses, but I'm feelin' real conflicted here... ah, you think I could test them out a bit? See, to bear the full responsibility of their transport, little old Teirow believes we must have a good understandin' of their contents. I'm not thinking anything indecent. Nothing indecent, okay? On top of pure work-related morals..."

"I'm sure they'll be too stimulating for a virgin like you."

"I-I... I ain't no virgin!! I throw my own weight around!!"

“Yeah, yeah, that’s right, Mister H. Teirow. By the way, it seems the ship your purchased has just docked. The preparations for the handover are complete.”

On Koume’s voice, the two looked at one another. They stood with good momentum, running off towards the station’s high-speed lane.

“Whoah, this is bad. I’m heatin’ up here. How’s the ship gonna look? Did they properly attack the drill?”

“No, you already looked all over the 3D diagram, didn’t you? And what’s this about drills? Waid a second, you just said properly, didn’t you? Eh? You really installed one?”

“Drills are a man’s romance!! I won’t let you talk smack about them!!”

“Do you have some sort of trauma about drills, Mister Teirow? In psychology, they are sometimes seen as a symbol of the male genitalia, but... ah, I see. So that is how it is.”

“Are you really an AI!!?”

As Tarou reached the zero gravity space, he joined Maar in grabbing the high-speed wire he had gotten quite used to, accelerating himself towards the bridge.

“But like, do you really think we’ll be alright? Even from an amateur’s eyes, those were some absurd blueprints.”

“You think? They were a bit irregular, but the designer was a professional, so I think it’ll be alright. And it’s quite common that the ship’s core is brought in from an outside source. It seems the ship you were riding had considerably high specs, so I don’t think you need to worry.”

“In regards to that, Koume shall also press down a seal of approval, Mister Teirow. That ship’s BISHOP-based operating system was quite something. Rather, is that not the reason you restrained yourself from selling it all?”

A silence came down. “O-of course,” said Tarou.

“... I’m shocked. Hey Koume, you can’t take your eyes off of this idiot. There’s no telling what he’s going to do.”

“Don’t be unreasonable!! It was the first ship I e’er touched, so I ‘ad nothing

to compare it to!!”

Passing through the residential area, and crossing the gate, the two humans and one robot. Following a gentle curve, they headed for the bridge, reaching the dock their BISHOP displays directed them to.

“... Wow.”

Looking at the newly-made destroyer moored at the dock, Tarou let out a breath of admiration. Spanning 320 meters, that other mass of metal had familiar Black Metal IN armored plating installed on the important parts, giving it a two-toned overall impression. Two giant nuclear fusion engine thrusters extended in the rear, and on both sides, 4 turret bays were marked out with circular patterns. It seems the battery was already operational, and its windows and signals that existed in various places let off pale-lit patters to signify the major handover preparations were complete.

“It’s amazing... and what it’ll be transporting is porno movies.”

“You’re right, but could you quit putting a damper on my mood!!?”

“It was originally a Thunderbolt-type destroyer, but it has completely become something else. The core, gun turrets and armor have been changed out, so perhaps that goes without saying.”

After the two and one observed the ship’s perimeter a while, they finally boarded. The sparkle of brand new iron, and the blinding light of the lanterns. His BISHOP screen notified him that the modernized facilities were all completely operational, and Tarou felt a sense of satisfaction at the ship he had poured a majority of his own fortune into.

“So this is the central control room. It’s quite comfy, isn’t it?”

The two stepped into a room lined with various control panels necessary to drive. The place had been constructed at the center of the ship Tarou was once stranded on, and it was made for the situation where control through BISHOP was impossible. So that each motion could also be controlled manually, the control panels were linked directly to the control systems. But the most important point was the fact this room was the center of the ship’s rotation. If the ship conducted any intense turns, at the very least, this space would be

safe.

“Right. If you ignore the fact I can’t see a drill, it’s perfect... but when we have ten seats, only having two drivers feels a bit lonely. Should we hire someone?

Maar poured a damper on Tarou’s words.

“Money goes away if you use it, Teirow. You should consider hiring someone once you have a steady income. As one of your shareholders, I can’t permit any wasted expenditures.”

“Well, you have a point,” said Tarou. Maar had used a portion of her own savings, alongside the funds she obtained from dealing with the salvaged parts remaining in the junk yard to acquire around 10% of Rising Sun Corp’s stocks. So she had ample authority to stick her mouth into the company’s finances, but even without any of that, Tarou intended to hear out her opinion.

“When’re we going to set off?”

Taroun brushed his finger against the control panel as he asked.

“Tomorrow.”

Maar gave an immediate response. Tarou looked at her surprise on his face, “You don’t have to say goodbye or anything?”

“I don’t have a family, and I’ve already settled things with my close friends. If you access the neural network, you can communicate with other star systems, so it won’t be much different from how we are now. It’s not like I was seeing them frequently to begin with.”

“Hmm... I see. By the way, what are you going to do about moving? Did you sell off your personal property or something?”

“Moving? What are you talking about? I already did your share too.”

“Heh?” said Tarou. And there, Koume put in her voice.

“Mister Teirow, the station’s residential district completely consists of module units the ship shares the same construction, so if you detach the room from the station and install it on the ship, then moving is complete. You do not have to carry just the fixtures like you would on the surface.”

“Thet sow... the future really is somethin’. An’ wait, come to think of it, it’s not like we’re settlin’ anywhere, so it’s obvious. Meanin’ this ship itself is...”

“Yes, it’s our house.”

Continuing on from Tarou, Maar gave a grin. Wrapped in an indescribable sense of exaltation, “Hehe, I see,” Tarou returned the smile. Within that gentle flow of air, a call notice popped up on Tarou’s BISHOP.

“Mister Teirow, a communication line had opened from the bridge. It seems to be from a mail-order delivery. Did you make some sort of purchase?”

On those words, “Oh, it’s here!!” said Tarou.

“I’ll be off a tic to get it. Lil Teirow’s heart’s going pitter patter on whether it was worst the large sum I paid.”

Strangely cheery, Tarou disappeared through the door. Maar’s expression shifted in doubt as, “What could it be?” she looked at Koume.

“Your guess is as good as mine, Miss Maar. He was acting quite secretive, so I purposely left him to his own devices.”

“That secrecy is bothering me... could it be some cargo for this ship? If he bought something stupid with company money, he’s not getting off lightly.”

“No, I doubt that is the case, Miss Maar. I keep track of the company ledger, so if he bought something, it would have to be from his personal earnings.”

“Teirow’s earnings? Ah, right, his wages for helping me out. If he used it, I don’t really mind... but I feel somewhat conflicted. I’d have preferred he use it on something decent.”

“Miss Maar. He is a virgin.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Not that I’m one to talk.”

A talk between women... it was dubious to call it such... as they carried on a talk that would make Tarou fly into a rage if he heard, the man himself returned to the control room with a large box in his hands.

“Fwehehe, it’s as good as the catalogue said it’d be. Hey, Maar. I don’t know how to use this sorta thing, see, so could you and Koume help me out?”

“H-help? No, wait. Stop right there! You should do that sort of thing by yourself!!”

“That’s right, Mister Teirow. Rather, what do you plan to have this here Koume help out with? Is it that? Are you going to rub it in because our shapes are similar? You pervert.”

“... Um, beg your pardon. Why am I being criticized like this?”

On the woman and another’s words, Tarou didn’t seem to understand what was going on. After thinking to himself a bit, he began opening the box without any undue worry.

“No, hold it right there!! No matter how p... wait, this is...”

Peering into the box, Maar made a surprised expression as she gazed at its contents. Koume swayed as she tried to look up with her expressionless camera.

“Umm, well. I’m sorry, Teirow. Hey, Koume, looks like it’s for you.”

The fist-sized Koume couldn’t look into the box. “For me?” she asked, and “Yeah,” Tarou replied, pulling out a mechanical doll around a meter in height.

“You’re always lookin’ after me, so I bought it as thanks. The latest model was a bit beyond my reach, so you’ll ‘ave to make do with this for now.”

What Tarou took out was an old humanoid AI body, and one made to imitate a human child. Even if it was supposed to be a young girl, it boasted mechanical looks, with a dolly molded face, and a lightly curving body. It was, at the very least, wonderful enough for Tarou to feel satisfied.

“Mister Teirow... I am ashamed of myself.”

Koume flashed her green light. Perhaps it isn’t to her liking, the thought clouded Tarou’s expression.

“Thank you, Mister Teirow. Until the day my quantum circuits burn out, I shall never forget this debt. Now hurry and transfer me to that body. I’m sure it will move much better than any of the newer models.”

Chapter 15

“System check.”

Tarou spoke curtly in the central control room.

“All systems green, Mister Teirow. That was a swift startup. As expected of a brand new product.”

Koume turned her brand-new face to Tarou, giving a small nod. Was the heartless, yet proud tone he heard just his imagination? To Tarou’s question of, “Any contact from the station?” Maar replied, “No problem.”

“We’ve received permission for our departure, and we’ve already reserved a space in front of the stargate. I’ve properly coupled the Rocky as well.”

Tarou confirmed the forms of Koume and Maar, leaning back in their seats, and gave both of them a thumbs up.

“So you have to get permission for that. I really am glad I’m not alone ‘here... now then, let’s be off!!”

Tarou started up his bishop, and deployed the function to activate the ship. There was already an automated takeoff function, but if he relied on such things, he would never fully learn how to handle the ship.

... Battery heat regulating. Set at half output...

... Propulsion control program set to stable operation mode...

... Run cruising program...

Once he had all the ship’s control functions in order, the ship let off a light tremor with its breath of electricity.

“Destroyer Plum. Takeoff!!”

Alongside Tarou’s call, Maar carried out the final takeoff procedures., and the ship slowly began parting from the station.

“Rotate hull 90 degrees, activate overdrive. Destination: Stargate SG-3835.”

The ship quickly responded to his stream of orders. In a mere four seconds, the destroyer completed its rotation, the energy from the hydrogen plasma sustained in the fusion core spewed from the two main thrusters, pushing the large mass of metal forwards.

... Run overdrive...

A piercing high sound.

A breath of relief within the silence.

“And problems?”

Tarou asked as he raised his body from the seat designed to always keep the body sprawled in regards to the direction of movement.

“No abnormalities, Mister Teirow. Rather, if a problem came out in just the takeoff and warp, we would have to sue the manufacturer.”

On Koume’s voice, “Sure enough,” said Tarou. He took a big stretch, pulled a drink from the side board, and poured it into his mouth.

“Wait, what are you doing? We’re already there?”

At Maar’s chiped voice, Tarou gave an, “Eh?” after which a tremor instantly came down.

“Wait a– oh right, we were right next to ittttttt!!”

A coffee-like liquid spilled from the cup, dying tarou’s clothes a shade of brown.

... Overdrive terminating...

“... I went and dirtied my new ship within two minutes of its departure... looks like I live on the wild side.”

“If I have to say, the proper term is child, Mister Teirow. I shall stream in exterior footage to the screen. This is the first time you are seeing a star gate, right, Mister Teirow?”

Tarou raised his face. The screen showed a large, cylindrical structure, , with countless ships of all shapes and sizes floating around it.

“So this is the stargate... that’s quite a simple design. I was expecting

somethin' cooler. When it comes to size, once more, it's a hundred times bigger than I thought it'd be."

Tarou's BISHOP notified him that his velocity relative to the stargate had exceeded 200km, but no matter how he waited, he didn't feel he was getting closer at all. Its size was simply so great that he understood it was something close to an optical illusion.

"A beacon program was sent from the stargate's control tower. I'll start it up."

Tarou gave Maar a nod, gazing over the self-executing beacon program. It seemed to be a program to lead them to a designated space in the stargate. Nothing more than a simple movement control and collision prevention program spread across his display.

"Whooah, this is an amazin' number of ships... they're all gonna warp at once?"

As they approached the gate, the flock came into sight; the countless ships lining the cylinder's interior. There were so many he didn't have the mind to count, but there were surely over a few hundred.

"Are they lined up on a plane so they don't collide... w-wow, wait. What the hell's that!!? That goes beyond bein' big!"

A large shadow appeared over the screen. Tarou rubbed his eyes to make sure he wasn't just seeing things.

"That's a transport ship of the Gigantech Company. They're a rare sight in these parts. As I recall, they have an overall span close to 4km? They have to be real careful regulating their gravity."

Tarou opened his mouth blankly. The point the beacon program directed him was right below that large transport ship, and he got the feeling he had become nothing more than a remora.

"Think we'll ever be pilotin' a ship like that someday..."

As Tarou quietly muttered, the surrounding space began to fill with a pale blue light. His BISHOP displayed the increasing operating ratio of the ship's overdrive equipment, and even after that value had crossed 100%, it still

continued to increase.

“Umm, Koume-san. The overdrive operating ration just reached some crazy number like 40,000%. Are we gonna be alright?”

“There is no need to worry, Mister Teirow. Calculating back from the distance to the next stargate, it will likely rise to roughly 150,000%. That would be a distance you could reach if you performed a normal overdrive 1500 times.”

I see, thought Tarou as he anxiously watched the digits racing up. Putting an overdrive device on overdrive wasn't a very funny joke.

“We're about to jump. If you don't want to spill what's left in your cup, I think you'd better sit down.”

On Maar's words, Tarou hurriedly returned to his seat. His clothes sticking down on him felt disgusting, but he was completely paying for his own mistakes.

Eventually, the light grew so strong he could no longer see the ships around, and it all suddenly came down. Every sight that entered Tarou's eyes looked two-fold, with a glimmer as if it were all letting off a strong light. Tarou closed his eyes from the blinding radiance, but the light had reached the insides of his eyelids.

... Confirming Jumpdrive...

Within that world dyeing pure white, the BISHOP screen alone projected its usual values. The beacon program reaching its end called its final function, changing even the BISHOP to a complete blank space.

... Jumpdrive execute...

—

“I have certainly received the cargo. Good work. I've deposited the payment into your account, so please confirm it.”

At the destination station, the smile of their client was projected across the video chat line. Tarou sent the man a similar simile, confirming the transfer from his BISHOP.

“Lately, any and everything's being carried by the large freighters, see. It's a

huge help there are still guys like you out there who take up the small jobs. The speeds on another level from waiting for a freighter to unload.”

Not wanting to let any valuable info slip by, Tarou listened attentively to the man’s words. No matter the era, business chances lay in these sorts of casual conversation. And that’s precisely what was happening right now.

“You have anythin’ else we could help you with? We just happen to have an opening right now, so we’ll take up transport or anythin’.”

Tarou emphasized the ‘right now’ part. “Hmm,” went the man across the line, staring as if to evaluate Tarou

“Rising Sun Corp, was it? Never heard of it before. Are you a new startup?”

“Yes, that’s right. We’re only a small place with just two employees, but both of them are real talented. A mechanic with salvaging experience, and a genius at electronic management. We also have two ships, so there’s quite a bit we’re capable of.”

“Two ships... could you be the owner of the destroyer that came in this morning!? Well now, you’ve become a bit of a rumor in my circle. What would anyone need a destroyer for out here in the sticks, is what they’re asking.”

On the man’s words, “Was that a mistake?” Tarou gave a bitter smile. He put it to heart to do something to disguise the armor plating later.

“I don’t know why you’re using that ship for something like transport, but if you’ll carry it, then I do have a job. Give me a minute.”

As the man said that, he looked in a different direction, and began whispering. In his boredom, Tarou sent a look to Maar beside him, and she sent him a thumbs up. You’re doing great, it seemed to say.

“I’m sending over a list right now. Could you take your cargo space into consideration, and decide what you’ll be able to carry? The destinations four stops towards the outer reaches. Do you need an advance payment?”

Tarou sent another glance at Maar. Seeing her shake her head, he answered, “No.”

“If you’re payin’ the jump fee, then we’re all good. We’ll take all the cargo.

Our hold's just been emptied out, so you've come at a good time."

Tarou showed a friendly smile. "Then that's negotiations complete," The man put his index and middle finger together, directing them his way. After hesitating a moment over what the gesture meant, he similarly put his fingers together and raised them. He didn't know whether that was the right action, but the man smiled all the way through.

"You can bring in the goods whenever you want, but if possible, you should ship them quickly. I want to show those pitiful men some dreams."

With those lines, the communication line closed. Tarou let out a sigh as he clenched his fist towards Maar in victory.

"We did it!! We've got luck on our side. Since we're not going through station management, we get the station's middle-man margin added on right as a bonus!!"

At Maar's delighted figure, Tarou naturally smiled.

"I shee. I hope they'll be good customers... by the way, four stops means the amount of times we'll have to go through the stargate, right? Why didn't we take an advance payment?"

On Tarou's question, Koume answered in her little girl form.

"You have the right interpretation of four stops, Mister Teirow. An advance payment is still a loan no matter how temporary it is, so naturally it comes with interest. If you have money readily available, there is no harm in avoiding loans."

Sending a satisfied nod to Koume's answer, Tarou confirmed his balance again. At the very bottom of the list, "RECEIVE 50000crd" was printed, giving him a sense he had undoubtedly completed a job.

"It's money that'll disappear if we use the stargate too many times, but... hehe, not bad at all."

With his account still open, Tarou took a screenshot of his BISHOP, and reserved it under the category, 'Important Data'.

Chapter 16

“This is some heavy depopulation.”

Tarou quietly muttered before the stargate to his destination planetary system. Back at the gate near Alba Station, there were enough vessels to fill the entire space, but now he could see no more than 10 ships in all.

“The Peta System... ah, it’s one of those so-called abandoned mining system, it seems.”

Maar did a quick search of the neural net on her display. As a question mark floated over Tarou’s head, Koume let out a mechanical voice.

“Mister Teirow. It is just as the words may imply. A star system originally colonized to excavate the belt, but that eventually lost its value once the metalliferous veins ran dry.”

“Belt... Ah, you mean an asteroid belt? I heard they were easy to work on due to the lack of gravity.”

“That’s true when it comes to certain ores. Though there are some where the existence of gravity increases efficiency. Those ones are mined on normal planets.”

On the two’s explanation, “I see,” muttered Tarou.

“Mining out the asteroid belts, I don’t know what to say at this point... ah, let’s see. They mined it, processed it, and made a station on the spot? Just what scale of construction is that?”

Tarou looked over the neural net site Maar sent over. He confirmed the ship was steering itself by a program before collapsing face-up into his seat.

“If we’ve gotten to a level where we just excavate small stars, the natural resource market doesn’t look too profitable.”

As he said that, Tarou stared at the star projected on the display. There, “You must be joking,” Maar continued on.

“Common metals aside, the value of laser metals is increasing year by year. They’ve already mined everything dry in the center of the empire, so they have to be brought in from the outer reaches. The price is soaring at a ridiculous pace.”

At Maar’s explanation, Tarou started to ponder. “Meaning,” he said.

“If you mine them in the outskirts, and sell them in the center, you can make a fortune? If it’s just transporting them back, we might be able to get a piece of the pie... though there’s a limit to what our ship can carry. You think we can carry something valuable like gold?”

“Yeah, I wonder. They make for quite a sum, so I doubt they’ll leave transport to someone without credibility. If you want to go that route, it’s best we mine for it ourselves, but the major companies have already snatched up all the mining rights.”

“Ah, as I thought... I kinda saw it coming.”

Tarou gave a jovial laugh. Maar turned him a curious expression.

“No, I was just questionin’ it all the while. See, you said the outer reaches are like a country at war. Why would they discard a place like this without any inconveniences, and make their way to the end of the world? I’m sure it’s not just resources, but you can find untouched mountains of profit all around the outside, right?”

On Tarou’s words, “Correct,” said Koume.

“You are perceptive at times, Mister Teirow. As you inferred, through the outer reaches spreads the dreams of all forms of get-rich-quick schemes. The problem lies in how you have to protect the resources and rights you obtain by your own hands.”

“The at times part was unnecessary, Koume-chan. By the way, about the self-defense part, when it really boils down to it, what does everyone do? It’s clearly impossible to settle it with our company alone. Is there an alliance we can join?”

“You really are perceptive from time to time, you know? It’s quite common to link arms between companies to carry out work. A union. There are companies

like Gigantech that can manage on their own, but that's a small minority. Though honestly, I haven't the slightest idea what's going on in the outer reaches of space."

"A corporate secret, eh... well, if they spread the method, everyone'd imitate it, so it's obvious. By the way, the from time to time part was unnecessary, Maar-tan."

Tarou said as he pointed his index finger at Maar.

"Ah, looks like the Jump Drive is starting."

"I was ignored!?"

—

The haze of dispersing lights.

His very existence wrapped in a hazy sensation.

Alongside the scattering light, his being transfigured to something resolute.

"Touchdooooouurrghh!!"

"Uwah, you threw up again!! Hey, dude, you haven't gotten used to it again?"

Tarou twisted his body at the discomfort that assailed his whole, turning to the rubbish disposal chute as he expelled the contents of his stomach once more.

"No, I'm much better than I was first time aroooooouughhh!!"

"Erk, talking or spitting, please choose one..."

"Hah, hah... if I could choose talking, I'd have done it long ago. My stomach's already spewing up on full auto... could this be this true auto-bilot? How anoooyourrghhh!!"

"No, why did you put your body on the line to say something so stupid..."

Tarou spit up his stomach's contents, which no longer consisted of anything but gastric acid, before trudging back to his seat.

"You called it jump sickness, did ya'? Dammit, I don't know what cosmic powers created this universe, but they added one thing too many. Hey, Koume-san. When will I get use to this?"

Wiping up the stomach acid Tarou expelled with the towel in her hands, Koume spoke.

“There are some individual differences in the speed at which one overcomes jump sickness, but in most cases, they can get over it after three or four times. But Mister Teirow, what you are experiencing appears to be several times heavier than a normal case. It seems one is generally only supposed to feel a light nausea.”

“Ueh, so I’m special. I shouldn’t ‘ave asked... wait, what? Isn’t somethin’ strange here?”

“This isn’t the first time something’s been strange with you.”

“No, not that. Where are we? What are all those floatin’ rocks?”

Thinking it was his usual nonsense, Maar made an unconcerned face, but confirming his serious expression, she immediately initiated a wide range search.

“Hah!? Wait, did the jump fail? We’re quite a ways before our destination gate.”

On Maar’s panicked voice, Tarou confirmed the scan results as well.

“The former asteroid belt zone... the mined-out leftovers ‘s what it is. Maar, leavin’ the detailed scan to you.”

Tarou took a glance at the countless rocks floating around the display, starting up the anti-debris laser. After receiving the detailed scan results from Maar, he began burning away the rocks in the way of their route.

“No large structures around. Koume-san, the jump drive was a system to leap from stargate to stargate, wasn’t it?”

On Tarou’s question, Koume responded from her ship system checks.

“Affirmative, Mister Teirow. The Jump Drive is actualized by the forceful ‘attraction and repulsion’ of two separate stargates. This is just a hypothesis, but perhaps some abnormality has come out in the destination gate.”

“I see, so we were unlucky... is this sort of thing common?”

“Negative, Mister Teirow. The probability of a failure is approximately 1 out of 10^{15} . Given the number of stargates, it really is a rare occurrence.”

Tarou raised a groan at the information coming in. Even to a newbie space traveler like himself, he could understand well enough that he was wrapped into an abnormal situation.

“Hey, Teirow, can you get in touch with any other ships? It seems these chunks of debris are mostly heavy metals, so our call signs and scans aren’t going well. Be careful of impact.”

Maar spoke in an uneasy voice. Tarou opened his BISHOP, and looked over the contact list of call signs coming in from around. From them, an absurd amount of noise-filled replies were coming in at once.

“This’s quite a number... alright, let’s take a sample. Huh? That’s no good. There’re over 20 ships here.”

Tarou recalled the ten-odd ships in the stargate as he began eliminating entire from the continued scan results. Repelling the pointless noise, and cutting out the diffused reflections and other unnecessary streams of information.

“28... to hell with it. Koume, there are around four that are undoubtedly ships, so could you open up a communication line with all of them?”

“Understood, Muster Teirow. Putting 4 online in order of proximity.”

Just as Koume finished speaking, the voices reached his ears.

“... Oh, it got through? This is call sign B112.”

“... Th..... ca... ign C111. I repeat. This is call sign C111.”

“Call sign C164. This is call sign C164.”

“Oy, the hell’s going on? This is call sign D024. Can you hear me?”

Alongside the noise hurting his ears, word came in from the 4 closest ships in the neighborhood.

“This is... um, what was it again? Ah, right. This is call sign Root. This is call sign root. It seems our jump drive failed, could everyone give me their positions?”

On Tarou’s words, replies of, “Give me a second,” came in one after the next.

After some time passed, the information on each ship came into his BISHOP.

“Hmm... so that was the signal of that ship... this one’s the reflection of that signal... in that case...”

Based on the signals coming in, he began eliminating signals from the scan data with even greater accuracy.

“Please stay online. I’ll send you our scan data right now. Though there are a few unknowns, at the very least, I think we’ll know where we are in relation to one another.”

“This is C111, information received. Your ship is equipped with a fine analysis device. Our analyzer’s no good. Can we leave temporary command to you?”

“This is Root. Um, let’s go with that for now. Though our analysis is set to super manual here.”

“This is C164, our expected course runs too close to C111. Can you tell them to take evasive measures?”

“This is Root, understood, C164. C111, please change your course a bit towards us.”

“This is C111, understood, Root. Though a bit is a bit vague. Requesting definite number.”

“Um, Koume, could you please... C111, I have sent the coordinates. Maar, another scan please. No matter how many times I calculate it, I get 28.”

Tarou suppressed his hands shaking from the tension of all this unfamiliar activity as he examined the information being sent in.

“I kinda took up command, but I have no clue what I’m specifically supposed to do. Can’t the other ships talk amongst themselves?”

Was there any way he could escape responsibility, thought Tarou. To that, Maar said, “I think that’ll be difficult,” and continued on.

“Even this ship, if we didn’t have your information processing, we wouldn’t be able to see a thing. I’ve been wondering it for a while now, but is your head—”

“Help us!! It’s WIND! There’s WIND in this field!!”

The moment Maar was about to say something, an interrupting scream came over the signal. Tarou's shoulders perked up in shock as he exchanged a glance with Maar.

"Mister Teirow. The calculations that led you to 28. Could it be that was not a miscalculation?"

On Koume's words, Maar gulped. Tarou saw it in the corner of his eyes as he let out a shaking voice.

"Enemy vessels... there are enemies swarming about!!"

Chapter 17

“W-what are we supposed to do... A-activate shield and turrets!!”

A throbbing beat, and an unbearable tension. Tarou gave thanks to the fact that his stomach was completely empty, as he barked orders in his quivering voice. To him, came Maar’s words, intermingled with irritation.

“For the shield, do you want beam? Physical? We don’t have ammunition loaded in the turret bay. Calm down Teirow. The enemy is still far.”

Looking towards Maar, Tarou nodded a few times. The fact that he himself was so afraid surprised him. And the reason was the existence of others besides himself.

“This is B112, I’ve come across the shadow of a WIND. They’re headed for D024.”

“This is C111!! They’re over here as well! I can confirm two of them just by sight. These sons of guns are swarming all over the place!”

“This is D024, help me! I’m being attacked by WIND.”

“This is C164. Root, issue an order. My scan’s no good, I can’t see a thing.”

The panic-tinged signals continued streaming in. Tarou opened his eyes wide at the chat log flowing across his BISHOP, repeating some shallow breaths.

“W-wait. What am I... I can’t take responsib...”

Unable to follow these sudden developments, Tarou sat straight in his seat.

“Mister Teirow, the enemy numbers are too great. In these situations, the established tactic is to gather them all in one place. Can you calculate their evacuation routes?”

On Koume’s level-headed voice, “G-got it,” he somehow replied, concentrating every nerve in his body on his BISHOP. Subduing his panic, he carefully derived a coordinate for them one by one.

“Done! Koume, transmit it to the other ships. Maar, I’m leaving the weapons to you, so get me a bit of time...”

“... Got it. Hey, listen Teirow. No matter what happens from here on, it’s definitely not your fault. This isn’t for comfort or consolation. It’s fact. I’m begging you, please remember that.”

As Maar said it with composure, she began operating the armaments. “What do you...” Tarou opened his mouth, but Koume cut in with her cold voice.

“Call sign D024’s signal has gone out.”

Tarou looked at her dumbfounded.

“You mean... that person from before died? Just like that?”

“Uncertain, Mister Teirow. There is a possibility they simply cut off communication, and a possibility they found some way to escape.”

“No matter how you look at it, these numbers are... Teirow, there are 4 coming our way. They’ll enter our firing range in about 5 minutes.”

“Wait, give me a second!!”

It was so sudden, Tarou raised a scream. Even now, Maar and Koume continued relating him information, but the images crossing his mind erased them all.

The wreckage of countless ships floating through the asteroid belt.
The form of a broken Koume floating weightlessly into the abyss.
The pale face of Maar.

“It’s no good... no good at all!!”

Himself stuck stagnant in a vast spaceship.

“I don’t want to be alone!!”

Standing up on his seat. Tarou hoisted Koume up. Leaving behind a dazed Maar, he ran from the room towards a pass-locked space only he knew about.

“Mister Teirow?”

He did hear the sound, but he couldn’t perceive it as a voice. Swiftly linking the password function, he set foot in the room.

In the room's center was a large machine.
Towering high to the ceiling, a monster of box and cable.

And a cold-sleep device.

"Mister Teirow. Koume does not recommend this course of action."

Koume's voice echoed through the vast room. Without returning anything, Tarou buried his body in the cold-sleep device.

"Combat, tactics, managing a fleet, anything is fine, just load it."

Tarou's eyes remained wide open. "But—" Koume went on, but Tarou cut her off.

"Hey, we're screwed, right? Maar wouldn't say something like that as a joke. 20 WIND's normally impossible, right? Hey, Koume, I'm beggin' ya."

The expressionless mechanical face gazed at Tarou.

"Mister Teirow, this destroyer is powerful, and perhaps it will be capable of taking on multiple..."

"Perhaps is no good, Koume!!"

Tarou interrupted her again.

"This ship may be a new model, and hell, it has some heavy armor installed. But it's being piloted by an amateur. Even if I did my study, there's a limit to that. Koume, we don't have any time!!"

"..... Mister Teirow. Will the imperial navy officer training program be enough?"

On Koume's voice, Tarou gave a courageous smile.

"Thanks, Koume... okay, make it quick. Or Maar'll get lonely."

Koume removed her eyes from Tarou's crooked smile. She plugged her own finger into a cable near him.

"We are in a hurry, so I will do it without putting you to sleep. Mister Teirow, please grit your teeth."

Tarou tried to return some words, but what came out in their place was an unintelligible scream.

The miscellaneous memories circled around him like a revolving lantern.
The enormous load of information flying at him...
his brain had no time to prepare to accept it,
And it was all overwritten to black.

... Weapon Information...
“Principle of optic weapons... principle of ballistic weapons...”

... Controlling a Battleship...
“Application of combat maneuvers... application of evasive maneuvers...
application of electronic warfare...”

... Close Quarters Combat...
“Alignment control... future prediction... cipher firing...”

... Strategic Command...
“Diversion... assault... search... concealment... surprise...”

... Controlling a Fleet...
“Group command... grasping communication... managing rank and file...”

... Special Control...
“.....”

—

“UWAAAAAAAAH!!”

With bloodshot eyes, Tarou rolled out of the machine. The gastric juices he had unconsciously spit up brought an unpleasant sensation as they burnt his throat. The brain that was said not to possess a sense of pain was raising screams of pain.

“Mister Teirow, take deep and slow breaths. Do not forget to exhale.”

Tarou’s stuck-open eyes gazed at Koume. Matching her movements, he slowly got his breath in order.

“Hack... lletts go, kokkoume. maar is waiting.”

His head was still mush, and he had to lean on Koume to stand. In his right eye was an image of the ship. On his left, the expanded number of BISHOP functions.

“Fufu... fufufu... huh? Why am I laughing? Ah, dammit, my head hurts.”

Tarou muttered to himself as he opened the door to the central control room.

“Teirow!! Where did you... wait, are you alright?”

Maar’s face was pale. Tarou moved just his eyes to take in her form before, “I’m fine. You can scold me later,” he settled in his seat.

“Engine output 80%. Ignore all debris with a danger level 3 or lower. Concentrate laser on the front. Alter the fleet’s predicted reunion point. Set both shield and turrets to beam. Set the secondary shield to physical, and prepare for collision.”

As Tarou swiftly sent orders through his BISHOP, he allocated work to Maar and Koume.

“You... used that device, didn’t you?”

“Mn, I just kinda went through six years of military academy.”

“Mister Teirow. We will soon come into contact with the enemy. Time until the fleet converges, 120 seconds.”

“Aight,” Tarou returned to Koume, as he led the ship alongside a conspicuously large chunk of debris.

“High speed turn.”

“Hah!?”

“I said high speed turn, Maar.”

Tarou said as he operated Bishop, forcing the ship into a vertical 180 degree turn. The scenery that used to be behind them reversed, as if the world had inverted at a fearsome rate.

“Concentrate the Thunderbolt’s armaments on the front. Suspend the engines. Use the rock as a wall, and continue cruising. Koume, lock onto the target.”

“Command received. Lock onto closest threat?”

“Mn, all of them.”

Koume showed some surprised motions unbefitting a machine. With a backward glance, Tarou activated all the turret lock systems and began aligning them. Including the weak gravitational pull of the obstacles around in his calculations, he separated debris and enemy aircrafts.

“This is C111, I can see you. I’ll provide support. Where should I aim?”

“This is C164, I’m behind you. The electromagnetic obstruction is terrible, and I can’t lock onto anything.”

“Maar, transfer the lock-on coordinates to C111 and C164. Turret 1 and 2 commence fire. Koume, I’m leaving the shield to you.”

Eventually, multiple WIND crafts appeared from the space between the debris. As he’d seen once before, they boasted designs made of odds and ends. Commencing its attack, the Plum’s turrets emitted beams, piercing through and destroying one of them.

“Enemy response gone. One craft down.”

“Yippee, let’s keep at it!! Fire 3 and 4 too!!”

The four double-barrel turrets on the plum could each fire one shot per second. Those eight beams continued spitting out madly. Those blue lights glittered as they reflected irregularly off the debris, and if they weren’t in battle, it would be an exceedingly whimsical scene.

“This is B112, I’m sorry I’m late. I’m being chased by 3 WIND. Can you do anything about it?”

After taking out two WIND crafts in succession, Tarou turned his attention to B112.

“This is Root, could you keep flying straight ahead? Maar, start the engine. Start edging backwards at a speed where we don’t leave anyone behind.”

He continued his bombardment without waiting for an answer. A small space craft rounded the debris, and one of the WIND crafts following behind it went up in flames. It was unknown whether they took it as a provocation or not, but the remaining two wind ships altered their course towards Tarou.

“Mister Teirow, two enemies have begun firing on us, and another three have

entered our firing range. C111 has shot down one ship.”

“Got it, Koume-can. I’m countin’ on you to manage the shield.”

“Teirow, we’re leaving the asteroid belt.”

The space crafts hurtled back with good momentum. The WIND chasing them were silenced by concentrated fire from the Plum. On top of that, three more WIND crafts shot out, firing their beams to scrape away the Plum’s shields.

“If it’s brute force, we ain’t losin’!! This isn’t a destroyer for nothing!!”

Acting as a shield for the other shields, the Plum devoted itself to firing its beams. The WIND activated laser jamming to obstruct his attacks, Tarou immediately added the curve the jamming bestowed on the lasers to his calculations, shooting them down.

That exchange without an ounce of strategy continued on for close to 30 minutes, draining the Plum’s remaining shield to 20%. As the final WIND let off light and heat as it ceased movement, silence finally returned to the area.

“Get out here... come and get me. I’ll shoot you all down.”

Tarou muttered as he glared at his display and BISHOP with bloodshot eyes. There, Koume let out a calm voice.

“Mister Teirow, the total number of crafts shot down has reached 25.”

“25? Three left... ah, no, the rest are the allies behind me.”

“Right... hah. It doesn’t really feel like I survived that one. It’s not like the problem’s gone, but for now, we’ve gotten out of it alive. By the way, the ship is safe. Though some places were burnt.”

On Maar’s words, Tarou began checking over the ship. As she said, some portions of the hull’s armor were singed, but... it wasn’t as if the shields could diffuse the beams entirely... and it didn’t seem any of the damage had reached the interior.

“This is C111, you’re a lifesaver, admiral. When we get back, I’ll treat you to a drink.”

“This is C164, that was a splendid battle. Hey, everyone, how about paying some of the reparations we’ll get from stargate management to Root?”

“This is B112. C164, I agree with your proposal.”

On the voices over the communication line notifying him of their good health, Tarou felt relief from his heart. He closed his eyes, collapsing into his seat, quickly losing a hold of his consciousness.

Chapter 18

“... Damn straight!!”

Alongside a strange cry, Tarou raised his body. Nervously overlooking the area, he noticed he was in the sick bay of the spacecraft Plum.

“Good morning, Mister Teirow. Just what sort of dream might you have been dreaming?”

At the voice coming down on him from above, “No, these sunglasses were...” Tarou leaned his head backwards. Koume tilted her mechanical head.

“How are you feeling? The full body scan concluded there were no abnormalities, but there is no way to discern the inside of your head. And the medical benefit of leftover skin has been proven. Live your life with confidence.”

“What’re you talking about!? Ah, no way, I kinda get it, so don’t say anythin’. I don’t want to hear it, lalala.”

Tarou held up a hand to silence Koume’s next words once more, “I don’t feel too bad,” he said as he stood.

“What’s the situation?”

As he walked towards the exit, he offered a short question. Koume opener her mouth.

“Yes, Mister Teirow. At present, we are in the midst of a long-distance warp drive to the destination point. Approximately 8 hours have passed since you collapsed. By the way, do you have any recollection of call sign C111? He purposely conducted malicious hacking over the neural network to establish contact with the imperial government.”

“Oh, now that’s quite a messed up idea. So they came to save us?”

“That’s right. Though it seems the government was momentarily devising a mission to assassinate him, once our circumstances were brought to light, they

immediately stepped down.”

“Assassination, now that doesn’t sound peaceful... I’m kinda gettin’ a sense of how this imperial government maintains its public order.”

Arriving at the central control room, Tarou set foot inside. After Maar– who had been working on something at the display– spotted him come in, she silently made her way over.

“Don’t do something like that without discussing with me again. At the very least, you could’ve offered a word as you went off.”

“No, I don’t think I’ve done anything you have to worry ab–”
“We’re partners. Was I the only one who thought of it that way?”

Maar’s voice overlapped with his. Unable to add another word, “I’m sorry,” was all Tarou could let out.

“Mn, don’t look so disheartened. There was no helping it in that situation, and looking at the results, it’s because of you that we were saved... looks like I’m the one who should be saying sorry. Perhaps my anger’s unjustified.”

On Maar’s voice, Tarou made an indescribably bitter smile.

“No, no. I don’t know what to say about that. I was just all over the place from my unrest, and lookin’ back on it now that it’s all over, I really didn’t do much, right? Maybe we would have been able to force our way through normally.”

“No, I am the one who does not know what to say about that, Mister Teirow. The one who made the decision to slip out of the asteroid belt, and the one who took command was you. Pursing them may have not given a bad outcome, but you can honestly be proud of yourself.”

Tarou felt somewhat saved at Koume’s voice. He offered Maar another word of apology before he switched the display to show the ship’s exterior.

“In the end, see... I was unprepared, and reckless, wasn’t I. My resolve was much lower than I thought it was, or ‘ow should I put it...”

While they were moving at high speeds through a warp, Tarou looked over the stars that looked no different than usual. The universe was vast, and the stars were distant. In a mere few lightyears of movement, the scenery would

barely ever change.

“Well, let’s see. To be honest, I could say the same for myself. Perhaps I was thinking of this as one of those dreams of adventure I always had as a kid... this is reality, I have to get a bit more of a grasp on that fact.”

As Maar looked into the distance, “Maybe,” said Tarou.

“But havin’ dreams and goin’ on adventures, they aren’t necessarily bad things. If the romantic throws it all away, what you’ve got is just another old man.”

As Tarou gave a wink that didn’t fit with his grin, Maar let out a laugh.

“What’s with that. So in my case, I’d just be some old lady? We can’t be having that. Looks like I’ll have to do my best chasing after my dreams.”

“Fuhehe, go right ahead, my dear. Hey, by the way, Maar-tan. It looks like you’ve been fiddlin’ around with BISHOP for a while, but what’re you doin’?”

“What? I’m regulating the overdrive device. That C111 guy, his name’s Allan, but anyways, it’s because of him that we were able to use the gate at our destination. Since we had the imperial government’s permission, we had them open up a gate at our coordinates.”

I see, Tarou nodded at Maar’s explanation. By the explanation he had gotten from Koume not too long ago, the gate was something that pushed and pulled. Thinking about it along that vein, they were currently being forcefully pulled through space. To try and help Maar, he started up his BISHOP, but a question mark floated about his head at what he saw.

“The hell’s this? So this is the program that controls the overdrive... right? There are quite a few function’s here I’ve never seen before.”

“Of course there are. In its base state, there’s no way of telling how many days it would take to get there. To make sure the main engine battery flows to the drive, I ‘fiddled’ with it.”

“Fiddled? In that short period of time?”

To Tarou’s surprise, Maar stopped her hands, and said, “Because it’s my Gift.”

“Mechanical engineering. That’s my Gift. Even if I look like this, they called me

a genius when I was younger, you know.”

“Gift? Ah, you said it a few times before. Like when you asked me if I was a gift holder or something. Is that like, something of a special sort of talent?”

“Let’s see. It’s not like they’re particularly rare or anything. It’s what they call people whose BISHOP construction speeds reach abnormal levels limited to a specific field.”

“Hmm. So that’s why you’re good at working with machines. Explains a lot. Dismantling a ship isn’t usually something you could do alone, after all. At first I thought, ‘For real?’... er, rather, I thought it was real amazin’.”

Yeah, yeah, Tarou nodded a few times. Tarou wondered just how much of a saving grace Maar would have been if she was on that drifting chunk of space wreckage with him. After a while of silence, “Thank you,” Maar muttered as she leaned deep into her seat.

“But because of it, I got a misunderstanding and of all things went and made a salvager of myself. If I had joined a company like a normal person, I’m sure I’d have been able to lead a much better life... by the time I noticed that doing everything on my own was difficult, I had already gotten to quite a good age.”

To Maar’s confession, “I see,” said Tarou.

“But bein’ a salvager is cool. If you get a hit, you make it big, and while it’s not totally relevant, I think it’s alright to dream big.”

“Right... fufu, you’re the only one who’s ever said that to me. They all say it’s dumpster diving, or pointless gambling. They even call it black-market business. I should’ve just gathered some comrades, but my thoughtless pride was too high for that.”

“That so... so you’re saying it ‘was’ too high? Past tense?”

“Ahaha, how mean, Teirow. But yeah. You’re right. I’ll admit I’m not being honest.”

Maar looked up at the ceiling as she laughed. Tarou looked at her from the side, “By the way,” he said to change the topic.

“In the end, what was the cause of that anyways? For an accident, there were

a few too many pests lurking around. I'd rather not be a magnet for trouble."

"About that," answered Maar.

"They're talking about how that might have been intentional interference by the WIND. Lately, there have been new types of WIND popping up all over the empire, so it wouldn't be strange if there was a WIND equipped with a warp jammer. How troublesome."

"Ah, as long as they have the parts, they'll use whatever they can get their hands on, right? They're kinda like salvagers."

As Maar said, "Could you not group us together?" Tarou sent a smile, letting his thoughts spin around the WIND. Just like what had happened to them, he worried the number of victims from WIND attacks might increase. But simultaneously, perhaps his earnings as a transporter may increase, a business manager's thought floated in his head.

"So getting a warship rather than a fast one was the right decision..."

Tarou quietly muttered. If he had a speedy ship, perhaps he would be able to outrun them, but he wouldn't have been able to save the three ships following behind the Plum's warp. Tarou understood that he had no need to bear responsibility for them, but he couldn't help the fact it would make it harder to sleep at night.

"This is C111, can you hear me, admiral?"

A voice came through his BISHOP. "Loud 'n clear. Allan, was it?"

"Yep, it's Allan. Pleased to meet you. Negotiations with stargate management are over. They're putting out two million credits per ship as reparations. Personally, I don't think it's a bad figure, but what should we do? Everyone said they'd leave the right to decide with you."

"Two million... whoah, that's worth ten round trips of all the cargo we have on us now. Yep, our financial department's givin' the okay, so let's go with that."

"Got it. Then we'll take a million each, and request five million for you. As I recall, your place's a corporation, right? It's been authorized as a government mission, so you'll be able to take it easy for a while."

“Five mill—!! No man, givin’ over half is a bit mumhff. “

Having everyone hand over half of their reparations was such a high ration Tarou couldn’t help but decline. But his mouth was covered up by Maar, who silently approached with skillful movements.

“You should... accept their gratitude. Teirow.”

Maar gave a business smile. Feeling fear at the sheer purity of her smile, Tarou gave an honest nod. There, a voice came across the line once more.

“But that really was a disaster for the lot of us. Before your ship came to the rescue, I ended up praying to the folks five times. ‘Save me mama!!’ I cried.”

“Ahaha, of cou... huh? Ah, yeah. Yep. That’s right, I was also prayin’ in my heart.”

As Tarou said that, he ignored Allan’s words of, “What’s wrong?” and cut the line.

“You had parents, right? Were they both in good health? Ah, um. I’m talking about when you were on earth.”

Tarou’s body twitched at the voice that called out from behind. Come to think about it, she didn’t have any relatives, he recalled.

“Well, from what I can remember... they should... have been.”

“Should? Fufu, what a strange response. I’m sure you didn’t call them often enough. Were your parents a lot like you?”

“Ah? Yeah... that’s right. They always used to say, like father, like son. I’m feelin’ a bit sick, so could I go back to my room?”

Said Tarou as he fled from the room. Maar’s dubious voice barely reached him from behind, but he chose not to hear it.

“Can’t say I didn’t see it comin’...”

Tarou let out a small sigh at the first lie he had ever told Maar.

The faces of the parents he should have known well,
Not even a fragment of them remained in his memory.

Chapter 19

“You’re searching for earth? That ancient planet of legend? Okay, that sure is an interesting joke. So what are you really up to?”

Tarou safely arrived at the station of his delivery address. In a tasteful bar of the station, call sign C111– Allan– scratched his brown hair as he asked. With a good physical constitution, he stood a head higher than Tarou, and when they sat along the counter like this, an outsider would see them as an adult and child, thought Tarou.

“No, it’s true, I tells ‘ya. We’re just doin’ jobs to earn travel fees, and our main objective’s the search.”

Tarou restlessly pressed his butt against that unfamiliar high-class chair. Allan took a swig of his high-proof alcohol as, “Hey, don’t hide it, admiral,” he said.

“On a scavenger hunt with a blackmetal armored warship? No way that’s going to convince anyone. The contents of your load was what it was, but more ‘n anything, you seemed to know the ways of battle. Might you be on a secret mission from the government?”

“If I look like a military man, perhaps you should get yourself some glasses, Allan. I do ‘ave the knowledge, but I really am an ordinary person.”

“Hmmn... well, we all have things we can’t talk about. Hey admiral, how about you give me a piece of the pie? I’ll show you I can do good work. When it comes to ‘Handyman Allan’, I’m a bit famous in this station.”

After he’d downed all the drink in his hand, he immediately placed another order on his display. Tarou hesitated at the unfamiliar taste of alcohol as he took some sidelong glances at the man. In that previous battle, Tarou had seen his skill as a pilot... in his small-size frigate, he had taken down three WIND ships... if he would join the corporation, he would surely be a great help. But as long as Maar was there in control, Tarou couldn’t just give permission so easily.

“By handyman, you mean you take on all sorts of requests? Even if you call it handy, what sorts of things can you do?”

Tarou observed Allan as if to evaluate him. In response, “Oh, so you’re on board?” said Allan as he gave a grin.

“Asking a handyman ‘what can you do’ is a boorish question, admiral. Generally everything. If the man says do it, you do it. That’s a handyman.”

Allan reply was almost a riddle, and Tarou tilted his head wondering if that was really an answer at all. Allan gazed at Tarou with his blue eyes, “How oblivious of the world are you?” he asked.

“Handyman’s a popular job in the stations. Are you some elite straight out of military school? Well so be it. Rather than explain, it’d be quicker I just showed you.”

Saying that, Allan removed a pulse chip from the badge stick to his chest. As soon as he received it, Tarou stuck it to his own forehead.

“... I see. So that’s what it means.”

Sent from the ship was what you could call Allan’s resume. What technical skills he held, what sort of jobs he had taken to that point, and what results he had gotten in them. They were put out in a list. The contents of his work covered a wide ground, and Tarou didn’t have the motivation to read through its entirety.

“Ship pilotin’. Maintenance. From information gatherin’ to cleanin’ and cookin’, looks like you’ve got it all down. Sure enough, it does look like you can do anything... On the contrary, I’d like to ask. When you’ve pulled off so many jobs in 8 years, why do you want to join our company?”

On Tarou’s question, he gave a laugh and answered, “It’s the smell.”

“The smell of money to be made is wafting all over the place from you. I won’t ask the specifics, but you’re trying to do something big. I can tell.”

Allan’s words weren’t particularly wrong, so, “Yeah, well...” Tarou gave a vague response. Searching for information on a long-lost planet... no matter how you looked at it, you couldn’t call it something small.

“Hehe, I knew it. Oh, I’m not telling you to let me in your corp here and now, I don’t mind if you just send around some work to me as an outsider. You can tell by looking at the list, but I can put five people to work at most. Though we only have one ship.”

On Allan’s explanation, “Got it,” said Tarou. And, “There’s somethin’ I’d like to ask as reference,” he continued on.

“If you’ve got five people and decent-enough earnings, why don’t you make a corp? I’m sure you’d get various benefits.”

“You mean set one up on my own?” asked Allan.

“If I could do that, I wouldn’t have so much trouble, admiral. How much do you think it takes to set one up? I won’t say I’ve never put in the effort, but it’s a tad difficult.”

To Allan’s troubled response, “I see...” said Tarou. As he had received a large sum without any effort, he felt a bit awkward.

“By the way, among your five a-are there any women?”

Allan shrugged his shoulders.

“Unfortunately, they’re all dudes. Why does that... Admiral. Could it be... you’re a virgin?”

Tarou shook in shock. Allan sent him a grin, bringing his face close to Tarou’s ear.

“Calm down comrade. You’re among friends. Are you interested in the trick behind pornoholographs?”

Tarou had already decided on Allan’s employment.

—

“Dhunga, dhundhunga!”

“Dhudhungadhun!”

Letting out strange voices, Tarou and Allan ran up to Maar.

“Dhunga?”

“Dhudhunga?”

Maar turned a doubtful face to the two standing still in a bizarre state.

“What’s with that, it’s a bit creepy... and wait, who is that guy?”

Maar blatantly exposed her revulsion. Hearing her tone, Tarou recalled she had only ever heard Allan’s voice.

“Dhunga.”

“Dhudhundhunga.”

The two men lowered their bodies, slowly taking distance from Maar.

“Eh? What? Wait, you’re scaring me.”

As Maar furrowed her brow, the two stopped moving again. Tarou looked at Allan. “Dhunga?” he asked, and Allan gave a “Dhunga,” in reply.

“Really, what’s with...”

Maar didn’t understand what was going on. Tarou and Allan let out another, “Dhunga?” sending Maar some eyes of expectation. After a moment of hesitation, she opened her mouth.

“..... Dhu... dhunga?”

With an embarrassed expression on her face, she sent an inquisitive look to Tarou.

“Yahoooooooo!!”

“Yahaaaaaaa!!”

On Maar’s voice, the two men high fived.

“Miss Maar. I detect a high concentration of alcohol from Mister Teirow’s breath. As has been said from ancient times, I recommend leaving the drunkards to themselves.”

A hotel in the station. In one of its rooms, Koume turned to Maar and spoke. “I can tell from the smell,” Maar answered, gently pushing Tarou away with a foot.

“Hah... I won’t tell you not to drink, but I can’t approve of you arbitrarily entering my room, Teirow. In your case, you probably unlocked it unconsciously, but you’re really going to be arrested someday.”

Maar looked down over Tarou as he wriggled around. She took out some sort of sheet from her own pocket, sticking it onto the nape of his neck.

“It’s a drunkard sheet. Um, it help the liver enzymes break down acetaldehyde. If you don’t want a hangover, keep it on until tomorrow... by the way, I’d be thankful if you introduced that gentleman already.”

On those eyes as if looking at trash, Tarou swiftly kneeled. His head somewhat sobering up, he gave an explanation about Allan.

“A handyman... I see, if that’s how it is, it’s not a bad deal. When it comes to researching, there’s a limit to what you and me can do on our own.”

With the talk passing through surprisingly easily, Tarou felt let down. Perhaps handyman was a more trusted profession than he had anticipated, he thought as he altered the job rankings in his head. At Tarou’s backward glance, Allan turned to Maar and Koume, “Pleasure to work with you,” he said.

“Yes, it is a pleasure, Mister Allan. By the way, do you boast any campaign experience?”

At Koume’s question, a question mark lingered over the two. “What are you talking about?” Allan tilted his head.

“No, you do not have to pay it any mind, Mister Allan. Even if it was somewhat damaged from the bombardments, you did a good job identifying our coated and camouflaged military-grade armored deck. I was simply impressed.”

At Koume’s words, Tarou swallowed his breath. As he turned his eyes to Allan, he found him awkwardly scratching his face.

“Oh, so I slipped up... yeah, I’ve been on a campaign before. It was so stiff I didn’t last a year. You think I altered my personal history? Don’t worry about that. I was excommunicated, and it was on the government’s orders that my military records were wiped clean.”

“Wiped clean, that doesn’t sound like nothing. What did you go and do?”

“Hm~, it wasn’t anything big. Just hacked a bit around the army’s network. I had some confidence, but they did a magnificent job of catching me.”

As he said that, Allan raised a laughed. Tarou and Maar exchanged a glance, “Will he really be alright,” they transmitted the message with their eyes.

“You don’t have to worry. The hacking was to expose a superior’s misconduct, and taking my extraneous circumstance into account, I got of with excommunication. Think about it, the guys who hack the army’s databanks are usually put to death without a proper trial, you know?”

Due to his complete ignorance towards the imperial government’s policies, Tarou couldn’t offer any judgement, but from Maar’s satisfied expression, he inferred it should be fine.

“Well, it’s a bit of an embarrassing past for a guy who’s never failed a job before. It’d be real helpful if you forgot all about it. More importantly, could you give me the specifics on your course of action? I only heard you were searching for some mysterious thing.”

Tarou sent a glance to Maar and Koume for confirmation, and while he was still a bit hazy, he began talking about their objective.

—

“I see, an unknown planet capable of habitation... that sounds fishy, but if it’s really there, it’ll be huge. A goldmine.”

Folding his arms, Allan made a serious face. There, Maar opened her mouth.

“Honestly, we were worrying over what to do. For now, we need information, so we were thinking to head for Andoa Station.”

“No, if you’re heading somewhere, you’re better off going to Delta Station. They’re both around the same scale, but when Andoa’s government facilities and personnel, Delta’s about finances. The information you can get is overwhelmingly different. Though if you have business with the government, that’s a separate story.”

Based on Allan’s information, Tarou opened BISHOP and looked at a map.

“Hmhhh, Delta Station is... here. 24 jumps from our present location. That’s far.”

“Yes, but you can use a long-range jump to get to Delta Station, Minster

Teirow. It depends on whether time or money is your greatest priority, but in essence, you can reach in 6 jumps.”

“Is it that? Something like an expressway... yeah~, I think we should prioritize time here.”

As Tarou said that, he quickly calculated the transport expenses.

“That’s how it is, so well, I’ll be counting on you, Admiral. We’re all single, so I’ll bring up talks of moving our base of operations to Delta.”

Allan held out his right hand.

Tarou took it, “Likewise,” he returned a smile.

As holographs contain too much data, it is not possible to send them over the network. It is necessary to physically deliver the chips.

Chapter 20

“Searching Dhunga... yeah, no results after all.”

Maar muttered to herself in her private room, laying herself over her soft synthetic bed. The several tens of thousands of protruding points within slowly shifted, the bed’s surface adjusting itself to the exact shape of her body.

“If it doesn’t even come up on the neural net, then he was undoubtedly spewing nonsense. How idiotic... by fufu. It was kinda funny.”

Maar rolled over, holding the duvet Tarou recommended in her hands. Having been completely raised in space, Maar didn’t understand the meaning behind a duvet’s existence, but it’s not like holding it didn’t help her calm down.

“Teirow, Koume and Allan. When I thought I was talking to someone for the first time in a while, they just keep coming one after the next.”

Nowadays, with the advancement of the network— while it was also largely due to her workplace— it was rare that she ever actually met anyone face-to-face. Even without any physical contact, she was able to live her life without any inconvenience. Truth be told, in the two years prior to her meeting with Tarou, she had carried out all her business through communication lines. It’s precisely for that reason that whenever Maar recalled her first meeting with Tarou, she found herself intolerably embarrassed.

“I’ve done my best too..... going out to the bridge to meet a man returning from a shipwreck... just what sort of cheap soap opera is this?”

Draping the duvet blanket over her reddened face, she violently kicked her legs. Thinking back, she recalled a romance flick with a similar setting running on the station’s broadcast network, and she started up a download through her Bishop.

“Hmm, this has an age restriction, but will it be alright... I don’t want anything

too spicy.”

Spotting the ‘D-Rating’ in the blurb, Maar knit her brow. Based on the approximate 150 thousand hours from her birth, her psychological age would ordinarily put her at a C. She had brought her clearance level up to F, but that being the case, it’s not as if she wanted to watch anything particularly extreme.

“But, well... right. This is studying, studying.”

As Maar muttered to herself, the 2 hour long simple 2-D drama began to play. Until not too long ago, she had enjoyed action and fantasy works that didn’t put any mental strain on her, but lately she had awoken to an interest in these human dramas. Maar asserted it was a sign of her maturing as a person, as she concentrated on the Drama.

“Uwah, this is more amazing that I thought it would be... is it really D? You sure it isn’t E? What company put this stuff on air?”

Despite her enthusiastic proclamation of, I’m going to send in a complaint, she sent a sidelong-glance to the so-called love scene sequence with a flushed face. If she watched it boldly, no one would find fault in the act, but in her case, her embarrassment was winning out.

“Aaah, that’s enough. Let’s stop it there. Stop. I think I’ve skipped over a few too many stages.”

Red to her ears, Maar forced down the stop button. After muttering some complaints at the destroyer’s operating noises that seemed louder than usual, she embraced the duvet once more.

“He called it a duvet, did he. It may be surprisingly nice... even so, when it really comes down to it, how are things going? What do I think of him?”

Imagining her colleague who’d been on her mind quite often these days, Maar buried her face in the blanket and began analyzing herself. After giving as level-headed consideration as she could, she reached the conclusion that while she did hold favorable emotions, they were likely something separate from romantic interest. Though with the sudden change in environment, she might momentarily misunderstand it as such.

“... For now, let’s observe our progress.”

After listing out the thoughts in her head over BISHOP, she stored it in a file labeled, 'Continued Deliberation'.

At that moment, a call tone resounded through the room.

“Hyaaah!!?”

Maar was startled enough to jump up... she had suspicions she actually did... and while there wasn't a necessity, she walked up to the door.

“Who is it... oh, Allan? Wait right there, I'll go out.”

At the fact it wasn't Tarou, she felt some disappointment and relief.

“Hey there, vice president. There's something I want to discuss with you... and wait, I know I'm the one who called you out, but aren't you a bit too defenseless?”

Allan turned to Maar's loungewear. “You think?” Maar said without any thought.

“If you think you can stand up to a high voltage current, then just try touching me.”

“You've got a stun gun on you? Those are surprisingly hard to handle. You sure you can properly hit an opponent?”

“It's circulating through my clothes. Want to test it out?”

Allan quickly retracted the hand he reached out half in jest. “What a scary little lady,” he gave a bitter smile.

“So what did you need to discuss? If it's something stupid, I'll get angry.”

“Ah, about that...”

Allan nervously looked around. From how his eyes focused on empty space for a moment, it was apparent he used BISHOP to check for surrounding presences as well.

“Hey, little lady. I'll get right to the point. What the hell's with that Koume AI?”

Allan brought out an unexpected question. “What, you ask...” As Maar was stuck for words, Allan went on.

“That AI is beyond a level you could sum up as proficient. To be blunt, it’s abnormal. You’ve noticed it too, haven’t you?”

“Right... but stop calling her ‘that AI’. She has a proper name, and it’s Koume.”

“... Ah, you’re right. My apologies. So about Koume, what site was she manufactured at? Even military AIs don’t go that far.”

“You think?” said Maar. Allan showed a somewhat irritated expression before saying, “It’s true.

“AI are things that can carry out, ‘Search,’ ‘Find Resolution,’ and ‘Associate’. That’s how all the AIs in the galaxy work it out. Even on the neural net. But that AI... I’m sorry. Koume’s a step ahead of that. Meaning she has that insight thing.”

“... Right. But what of it? It just means that some genius out there invented her.”

“Oy, oy, you know that’s impossible. We still don’t even know how us humans perform insight in itself. If that was resolved, it’d have been in the news ages ago.”

Allan was somewhat worked up. “Calm down,” said Maar.

“Since you didn’t beat around the bush, I’ll respond in kind. What exactly do you want to do with Koume?”

Maar emphasized with do. Her glaring eyes caused Allan to falter a moment.

“Do? It’s probably not the sort of thing you’re imagining. So don’t make such a scary face... there’s just one thing I want to confirm.”

“What?”

“Is she dangerous or not?”

On Allan’s blunt question, Maar made a blank expression. Eventually, she gave a broad smile and raised a grand laugh.

“Ah ha ha ha!! Koume? Dangerous? You really should keep your jokes in moderation. We’ve already been saved by her countless times. And even you, if Koume wasn’t there, you’d be crashed into the side of an asteroid in some

unidentifiable state, you know?”

Containing her laughter, Maar’s stance crumbled as she leaned against the wall. As Allan scratched his head with an uncomfortable look on his face, he looked into the distance.

“No, well. If she’s not dangerous, then all’s well. Our president here has some oblivious parts to him, see. I just wanted to come and confirm it.”

“I see. I’m sorry for laughing so much. I’m sure your response is the normal one, and what you’re doing is right.

“I’m thankful you’ll say something like that. If she looks fine, then so be it... Sorry for intruding so late at night.”

Waving his hand above his head, Allan departed down the corridor. “Hey, Allan,” Maar called to stop him.

“I’ll say it again. You’re correct, and if possible, it would be a big help if you continued giving us those sorts of warnings. Thank you. Good night.”

After confirming a, “Yeah, leave it to me,” from Allan as he disappeared around the corner, Maar turned towards her own room. At that moment, a strange metallic sound caused her to turn in the opposite direction from which Allan left.

“Koume?”

From the end of the corridor came the form of Koume in quite a haste. Noticing she was racing towards her, “What’s up?” asked Maar.

“You have come at a good time, Miss Maar. Would you mind sheltering me for a moment?”

Maar showed a dubious expression, but as Koume dived into the room without waiting for a reply, she saw her off with a fed-up look on her face.

“Oyy, Maar!! Have you seen Koume anywhere!!?”

What is it this time, she thought as she turned to Tarou’s voice. From the same direction Koume appeared, an out of breath Taroun ran up. Breathing wildly with his nose, “Where’d that girl disappear to?” he said.

“No, I haven’t seen her... did Koume do something?”

With that prior conversation with Allan, Maar was a bit nervous as she asked. “She did more than just somethin’,” Tarou spread his arms out wide.

“I was sittin’ on the toilet in my own room... um, well. Just goin’ about my business. And then, see, I noticed a button I’d never seen before in arm’s reach. You’d push it, right? Anyone out there would push it, right? It’s clearly there to be pushed, right?”

Tarou slowly closed in with his fervent speech. Maar backed away lightly as, “Yeah, okay,” she returned.

“So I did!! I thought something like a bidet was comin’ out, when I heard a high pitched sound you’d hear at a dentist’s office comin’ from down below. A real Griiiiiiiiiiiiiin. Looking closely, there was a high speed drill risin’ up from under my ass. I don’t get it. What does it all mean? That rubber drill was even politely coated in lotion.”

At the contents Tarou spoke of, Maar clankly opened her mouth.

“Um, it was a prank? By Koume?”

“A prank? This wasn’t anythin’ so cute and innocent. Why do I want to discard that virginity before my primary one!!?”

“Ah, you admitted it.”

“I ain’t no virgin!!!!”

Tarou ran off with just as much momentum as he came. It’s not as if she didn’t feel a shred of sympathy, but Maar couldn’t understand why he’d go to such lengths to deny his virginity.

“... Hah. Could you call it a storm of a night? Koume, the man has left the building.”

She called into the room; Koume timidly showed herself before long.

“You have my gratitude, Miss Maar. I finally installed the drill he so desired on the ship, but Mister Teirow seemed considerably angry. What do you think poor me should do?”

“Yeah... well, if he was really angry, I’m sure he’d search you out with BISHOP, so I don’t think you have to worry. It’s a good thing he’s so energetic.”

As Maar said that with a wink, she pointed her thumb into the room.

“More importantly, Koume. About the child-sized clothing you wanted. The package came in, so why not try it on? There were quite a few pieces that’d suit you well... ah, right. While we’re at it, why don’t we go to Teirow’s place? There’s no doubt he’ll forget his anger and praise you to high heavens.”

Leading Koume by the hand, Maar entered the room. There was no way this outstanding AI that even paid attention to fashion could be a dangerous existence. Maar reaffirmed it as she made a full-faced smile.

Chapter 21

“President!! We’ve finished taking in the cargo!!”

Wearing work clothes that consisted of characteristic vertical stripes of silver and red, one of Allan’s handyman companions called out. He wore a swimming-cap-like hat to assist movement in zero gravity, and Tarou felt the whole ensemble was somewhat reminiscent of old prison clothing.

“Should I make a uniform of our own sometime down the line... alright, good work out there.”

Tarou waved his hand as he answered, staring at the destroyer Plum that had increased considerably in capacity. The Plum’s original storage space was already overflowing with goods to deliver, another two additional cargo holds dangling on its left and right. In addition to the Rockboy joined nearby the thrusters, Alan’s speedster Stardust was joined at the substructure, giving the Plum the impression of a haphazard man attempting to carry all his groceries in one go.

“When we finally got a pretty ship for ourselves, for it to end up in such a state... well, it’s moistening our wallets, so it is a wonderful thing, in a sense..”

To Tarou’s side, Maar muttered as she organized various financial settlements.

“Well yeah, carryin’ 220% maximum capacity is like a dream for any deliveryman. When it comes down to it, money is money, but will we really be alright?”

“Alright? What do you mean?”

“I mean, when we don’t have a single qualification, we’re going to temporarily be charged with human lives. Does the government care about something like that? On earth, you’d need qualifications to drive a single taxi, you know?”

Tarou looked at the long line of people still in the process of boarding the

Plum as he muttered. They were a portion of the never-lacking group that had decided to leave the Peta system, the relatively affluent ones who had paid a moving fee to the Rising Sun Corp. What was already a deserted mine system had long reached an impasse, and with this time's WIND ATTACK as a trigger, all the stations in the system had gotten into a moving trend.

"The government couldn't care less. The empire is quite tolerant, but look at it the other way, and they're generally apathetic. There is only one constitution shared throughout the cosmos. Freedom and self-responsibility."

Maar said it as if it were only natural before returning to her finance work. Tarou wondered if it was liberalism gone way too far, but he didn't have the societal knowledge to determine whether that was a correct approach or not.

"From Allan to Teirow, This line is the last of our passengers. 1424 people on the dot. The cargo has also been fully taken in, it seems."

To the communication line that reached his BISHOP, "Good work," Tarou replied. As I recall, Allan should be over there, he thought as he peered out of the station's gate lounge towards the bridge.

"Admiral, I'm a little lower... right, right. Probably around there. I'm waving my hands right now."

Tarou spotted Allan in his spacesuit, waving his arms under the Plum, returning a wave of his own. Even if you called it a spacesuit, the only piece that coincided with Tarou's memory was the dome-shaped glass over his head. Apparently the pressurization wasn't carried out through air, but by the material itself, so it was a form quite close to full-body tights. Allan skillfully operated his jetpack, giving the Plum another inspection for damage.

"He really can do anything... this might sound rude to the person in question, but it looks like I've picked up some nice personnel."

Tarou quietly muttered as he stared outside. To that, "Yes, that does seem to be the case," said Koume.

"He bragged that he has never failed before, but it does seem Mister Allan holds a good enough history to back his boast. If he said he had the leisure to pick and choose, then surely that would be the case, but that also means he is

an exceedingly cautious one.”

Tarou nodded at Koume’s level-headed analysis.

“I hope he becomes a good stopper fer our reckless... by the way, Koume, ‘ave you computed out a route for us?”

“Yes, I have finished calculating a route, Mister Teirow. By your request, I have settled with time as the priority. 18 jumps total. If we are to carry out the station missions Miss Maar picked out, then we will be able to carry out 80% of them in 24 jumps.”

“Yeah, I think we’re gonna refrain this time. Even if everyone’s responsible for themselves, whether it weighs on my mind or not is a separate issue. The probability that 20 WIND will come crawling out next time isn’t 0, right?”

Saying that, Tarou shrugged his shoulders. What Koume had come out with was the shortest route to deliver all the Plum’s passengers to their destination star systems. Maar insisted to take on transport missions at the stations along the way, but Tarou wasn’t quite on board. Perhaps he’d be able to do such a thing sooner or later, but right now, there was a high probability the weight of the human lives on board would make for a higher pressure on him than need be.

“Well, whatever the case, we’re set for a long trip with no end in sight, so let’s just take it easy. Impatience’s what leads to blunder... but our ship really is a popular one. Don’t you think it’d be nice if I was that popular too? As a president.”

Tarou gazed at the other vacant-looking ships on the bridge, feeling somewhat apologetic as he spoke.

“Naturally, Mister Teirow. What immigrants wish for is security, and there is no ship better equipped to actualize that than a warship. If this move was due to some factor besides the WIND, then on the contrary, few would ever think to board a destroyer. Fuel consumption and ride. More than anything, capacity, which leads to pricing. No matter what factor you take into account, there is not a single good point to be found.”

“So you’re ignoring my own popularity statement. I see.”

On Koume's clear tone, Tarou stuck out his lips a bit. He wanted to tell her the Plum was a wonderful ship, but Koume's words weren't mistaken, so he called it off. As a warship, it was obvious. Compared to other transport ships, it definitely did lack in the area of comfort.

"Looking at our space, we're going to have to keep them in a common space. They'll have to put up with that... now then, shall we prepare to take off?"

Standing up and taking a big stretch, Tarou began walking off with a leisurely pace. Koume followed a little behind him.

"Mister Teirow, have you not grown a little taller?"

Tarou turned towards her.

"No way. I've finished my growth spurt ages ago."

—

"Teirow, have a look at the news!!"

Around half a month since the passengers boarded in the Peta system. Transport to approximately half the planned star systems had been completed, and as Tarou was about to doze off from sheer boredom, an emergency message came in from Maar. In the central command room of Destroyer Plum, Tarou— who had been lying down in the command seat a step higher than the others— half tumble as he dived towards the floor.

"News... ah, this one?"

Of all the news headlines displayed, Tarou picked the one with close to two extra digits in its viewer count compared to the other entries. He sifted his eyes through the detailed information that popped up.

"Um, what's this... an increase in WIND activity across the galaxy. The appearance of new models equipped with warp and beam jammers... these are the buggers we went up against. Umm, the imperial government has declared this a Level 1 state of emergency. It has issued address for all self-governing bodies to increase their vigilance. Star gates and stations are no longer obligated to pay reparations for damages caused in attacks from WIND crafts. Uwah, for real? That's downright dirty."

“Hey, Teirow, did you see the news? We were lucky... ick!!”

Bursting into the control room, Maar grimaced as she saw Teirow sprawled out like a shrimp.

“I’d like a video to see just what series of events led to you ending up like that... more importantly, did you see? Public facilities are no longer obligated to pay compensation for damages caused by WIND, it seems.”

In regards to Maar’s agitation, “Yeah, saw it,” said Tarou.

“They probably had to fork over so much reparations they could no longer ignore it. Under related topics, it looks like insurance companies are droppin’ like flies, so this might be a real crisis.”

“Yes, that’s right. Right about now, I’m sure the self-euthanizing facilities are bustling with life. And it doesn’t seem there’s a massive WIND outbreak at any specific point. What could this mean?”

On Maar’s words, “Yeaaah,” groaned Tarou.

“For argument’s sake, there’s an article saying the imperial navy is moving, and I doubt the central districts will be ruined. Honestly, no matter ‘ow many thousand or ten thousand WIND there are, from the empire’s regular army’s point of view, they’re somethin’ like trash.”

“You may have a point,” said Maar.

“But they definitely won’t dispatch them to the outer reaches. Ever since that mutiny incident happened, the empire never splits up its navy.”

“Mutine? What was it again? Did the king or whoever’s up there’s position get snatched up?”

“Yeah, something like that. A long time ago, the imperial navy left the center open or some large-scale military practice, and the soldiers that stayed behind tried to seize the capital, apparently. After a glaring match with the tens of thousands of practice ships that hurriedly returned, the incident got a soft landing. But if they went at one another, it would definitely be a civil war, right? Just thinking about it is scary.”

“Hweeeh,” Tarou raised a voice of wonder. It was a surprise that the great

empire that supervised the cosmos faced such a crisis, but as he imagined a battlefield on a scale with tens of thousands of ships glaring at one another, his pure manly blood heated up.

“From the navy’s formation, it’ll probably be two hundred superdreadnoughts and five thousand battleships. Then twenty thousand cruisers. In addition to fifty thousand destroyers, and several hundred thousand smaller vessels... I can’t even imagine it at this point. Just how are they planning to fight? This takes me back to when I was a kid callin’ out ‘A jillion!!’ and, ‘the strongest fleet evah!!’ We’re already at that level here.”

To Tarou’s fed-up face, “Sure enough,” Maar laughed.

“Though I think it’s a good thing it’s come to that. Also, there’s some news pertaining to the management of the company. I sent it over.”

A news piece immediately popped up on his BISHOP. As Tarou scanned through the article, “I see,” he touched a hand to his chin.

“So they’ve made permanent government missions out of shooting down and gathering info on different variants of WIND... I want to avoid battle if possible, but these may be nice if it comes down to it. Though if possible, I’d like to leave it to the people who do it for a living.”

The people who did it for a living... meaning bounty hunters and security companies with multiple ships in their possession. If he clashed head on with them, Tarou knew he had no chances of victory. In experience and scale and funds and personnel, just about everything was worlds apart.

“But it’s that. We have a destroyer of all things, so I can think up quite a few things we can do. Guhehe. Maybe spring’s a’ comin’.”

Of the ideas popping up in his head, Tarou began inspecting them to see which ones were actually feasible. The seas were stormy, but as long as he had a favorable wind, who cared? Tarou tried to think along that vein.

“Spring, eh... looks like winter to me. Not that the stations have any seasons.”

Maar gazed at the various stars on the display.

At the galactic empire.

The waves of the times were advancing.

Chapter 22

“Everyone, listen up!!”

Alongside Allan’s call, the 20 men and women snapped into posture. “They’re practically an army,” Tarou gave a bitter smile as he gazed at his employees. A majority of the employees were young men and woman, but among them were elders close to 50 in years.

“Alright, at ease. Umm, on this auspicious occasion... nah, let’s do without that pain-in-the-neck formal stuff. Everyone please form one line.”

The voice resounded through the barren room. In regards to his employees, who exchanged some looks as they formed a line, Tarou handed each some words of thanks alongside an envelope. And he handed out cups filled with alcohol.

“Aight, everyone got one? Now vice-president Maar-tan will tell you all about the envelopes. All yours, teach.”

Like a performer exiting stage left, Tarou smoothly slipped into the back. “I told you not to say –tan in front of other people,” Maar complained, as she took a step forwards.

“Yes, a great thanks to all of you. Umm, it’s only thanks to your efforts that this Rising Sun Corp has been able to achieve stable growth beyond our wildest expectations. This auspicious occasion is one to commemorate our new hold of an office in one of the large stations designated as a point of high importance, the Delta station. You have all been given a special bonus. The envelopes in your hands contain the detailed statements on your special bonuses, and you see... yes, I know paper envelopes may be strange in this day and age, but so is our president.”

Hearing of a bonus, the employees’ faces bloomed at once. Even as a newbie president, when he was looked upon with such warm sentiment, this isn’t too bad, he thought as he made a smile.

“Even if you call it a bonus, it isn’t anything too large. Don’t get your hopes up too high. But we wanted to establish these sorts of opportunities to discuss our company’s achievements and direction henceforth... rather, no matter how you look at it, this speech is supposed to be the president’s job. Why is it me?”

The employees raised some laughs at Maar’s retort. Allan showed the whites of his teeth alongside his four-man handyman brigade.

“Well now, that’s a bit rough on a socially inept guy like me. Yep, then let’s get to the drinkin’. Cheers!!”

Cheer were called back to match his call. There was no established custom of raising a glass to the empire, but Tarou had explained it, and Allan had made it common knowledge. It didn’t sound like a bad way to start a party, so Tarou had decided to make a custom of it in parties to come.

“A party to commemorate a new office, I’m surrounded by nothing but normies. Dammit, what is it. This dark impulse I’m getting to make a mess of them all.”

“No, why would you feel unrest at the party you organized yourself... rather, what’s a normie?”

“Normie. Noun. A person who lives a fulfilled life within the realm of reality. Goddammit!! It means people like you guys!!”

Tarou cried out as he ran off towards the neighboring hall. The employees stared at him blankly.

“No, you’re the head of those normie... aren’t you?”

Maar looked at Koume as she muttered. “Who knows?” Koume tilted her head.

—

“Yo, Admiral. Drinking alone in a place like this?”

Along in a rectangular room without anything in it. Tarou’s body was sprawled out over the soft synthetic carpet. This was the room supposedly planned for use as the president’s office, but to Tarou who would usually be onboard the ship, he knew he would barely have any opportunity to use it.

“Well, I’m just no good when everyone’s makin’ a ruckus, see. It’s a good thing the company’s goin’ steady, but it’s that. The future just goes off n’ does its own thing.”

Tarou continued staring at the ceiling. To that, “Is that some sort of philosophy?” Allan asked.

“Nah man, I mean it as I say it. We’re a company that was only started up a few months ago, right? Honestly, I hadn’t even thought of hiring new employees, but by the time I noticed it I’m surrounded by them. It’s only been a month since we were firin’ our guns in the Peta System, you know?”

“Yeah, well, you do have a point there. Things going so fast you can’t keep up? After we finished moving all those Peta folk, every day was delivery after delivery. Mn, looks like it really has been only 42 days.”

While Allan was likely checking over it on his BISHOP, “Right, right,” Tarou nodded.

“I think the local news probably played a big part, but talented personnel just come and gather on their own, and we have so much work we can’t handle it all. It’s all going so steady it’s scarin’ me.”

As Tarou said that, he recalled the news feed that ran through the star systems in the area. ‘Male-Targeted Porno Transport Company Saves Stranded Ships!!’ was the heading that covered their offense and defense in the asteroid belt, and it had both a positive and negative influence on the present state of the company.

“It raised our popularity, so we’re gettin’ people and work and I have no complaints, but why does every job comin’ in have to do with pornographic content? This old man doesn’t know what to do.”

“Sure enough!!” Allan raised a laugh.

“It’s nothin’ to laugh about. On the neural net’s BBS, they’re callin’ me ‘the protector of the virgin world’. No, that ain’t anythin’ we should be protecting. Just get rid of it, you lot out there.”

Allan raised an even greater laugh, before lying across the floor from stomach pain. Tarou sent him a sidelong glance as he continued on.

“Lately, there are even people comin’ directly to us to place orders for adult goods. No, no, we just carry them. We don’t make squat, and we don’t retail. In the first place, what’s with all this? Right now, our destroyer is loaded with 7 million 440 thousand and 320 units of self-pleasement implements, you know? That’s definitely not ‘ow you’re supposed to be usin’ a destroyer. Just how many tons do you think that weighs? At this point, I’m scared it’ll start generatin’ its own gravity. What am I even fightin’ here?”

“I guess it would have to be G?”

“Ah, yeah, yeah. Gravity and G ratings, very funny.”

Tarou said as he raised his body, gulping down the alcohol in his hand. Alan rose with him, “Well isn’t it fine,” he said.

“I know we don’t have any decent information right now. But when we do get some plausible information on the earth, that’ll be the time to burn through your money with a bang. No, not just money. Info’s something that’s destined to leak, so while you dawdle, the goons of the galaxy’ll gather around the stench of money. When it comes to that, what we need to protect ourselves is organizational capability.”

Tarou listened to his words with a serious face.

“If it’s found somewhere close to the center, then the battle’s all about how much interest we can seize. Contrarily, if it’s around the outer reaches, it’s brute force, plain and simple. Do you think you can win in a punching match with a superdreadnought from the Gigantech Company?”

“No, that wouldn’t even be a contest. We’d all be incinerated before our scans even reached.”

“That’s how it is. It’s not like you have to grab up all the interest. But if you don’t even have the minimum voice, then in the end, you’ll just lose it all. I’ve seen loads of those sorts in my time.”

“You’re right,” said Tarou, as he dimly thought over his future prospects. First, they needed some sort of information on earth. There was no room for doubt on its existence as a whole, but finding it without any leads was next to impossible. From the fact they used the metric system and their calendar... The

empire used the units of the metric system, and from their calendar... it was difficult to believe a year just coincidentally happened to share a length of 365 days... Even if he ignored his own existence, the earth undoubtedly existed at some point, and there were researchers out there analyzing history and etymology. The best start would be to try drawing potent information from those sorts of people.

Next was what came after finding it. As Allan said, putting acquisition of interests aside, if possible, Tarou didn't want it to be excavated out like the abandoned mine systems. While he didn't know if the ocean was still there, he wanted his beautiful blue planet to stay as it was. There weren't many people out there who would rejoice at the destruction of their own homeland.

"So the worst case would be if someone beats us to it. Especially if it's a resource development corp."

Tarou quietly muttered. "It's not unthinkable," said Allan.

"That really is a worry. If what you're saying is true, the earth's greatest value lies in biological resources, and as a psychological symbol. If it still remains, then its history and culture too. Trying to take its mineral resources seems unnecessary."

"Well honestly, with 70% water, developing it would be a pain, so there's no real need to mine out the earth."

"That's how it is. But some ill-bred mining corps won't give a rat's behind about that sort of thing. It'll take some time before biological resources produce any profit, and they'll need a considerable prior investment. If they wait around, the other corps would take it all away, and the day its historic value is acknowledge, that's the end of development. Nine out of ten times, they'll start digging the moment they see it."

Tarou didn't think he was shouldering the fate of the earth alone, and he was quite convinced that wasn't the case. In the first place, he didn't know the present state of earth, and he didn't know whether the countries of Japan and America still existed. Based on how things went down, there was even a possibility he'd find a wasteland ravaged by nuclear war. But at the very least, there was no doubt it would bring some influence to the cosmos.

“Maybe... um. I’ve been worrying over it for a while now. From the earth’s point of view, do you think they’d be happier livin’ quietly without bein’ a part of this galactic empire?”

A faint-hearted remark came from Tarou’s anxiety. To that, “Are you serious?” Allan asked.

“Ah, no... if some heartless guy’s eventually going to find it, then I think it’s best I try givin’ it as better a direction as I can. When it comes to attachment to the earth, I’m probably number one in the cosmos.”

As Tarou looked down and spoke, Allan slapped a hand against his back.

“That’s right, Admiral. You’re the only one out there sho’s really confirmed the existence of the earth. This might sound mean, but... we do believe you, but it’s not as if we have any attachment to the place. We’re all seeing our own dreams of money, and taking on your leftovers. But that’s precisely why we’ll follow you. Meaning, admiral, this is something we’re in together.”

At the slaps momentum, Tarou coughed a few times, before lightly touching his glass against the one Allan held up.

“... Right... you’re right. Thank you, I think my resolve’s wellin’ up here. Looks like you haven’t aged fer nothin’, Allan. As expected of the Wizard of the Rising Sun!!”

“Leave it to me, supporting the president’s an employee’s duty. More importantly, what’s that wizard thing?”

“... No, just forget it. You just finish up your jobs so skillfully, it’s like magic.”

Unable to say it was a term for men who’d reached 30 while keeping a firm hold of their virginity, Tarou hurriedly tried to play it off. “Hmm,” said Allan.

“That doesn’t have a bad ring to it. Should I start calling myself Wizard? Wizard Allan... hmm, not bad at all. I’m going to change my company registry.”

“No, wait a...”

Before Tarou could step in to stop him, Allan had used BISHOP to alter his name in the company registry.

“... Well whatever. I guess I’ll apologize for now, Allan... alright, let’s make this

company huge and find that earth!! We've got loads of things to do!!”

His goal and resolve settled, Tarou flowed with a motivation that seemed to come from his depths. He recalled the cheeriness he had lost along the way there, and for now he decided to tell all employees besides Allan the meaning behind the word wizard.

Chapter 23

With the Delta Station as an origin point, at times goods, at times people, and most of the time adult toys. Today once more, the Rising Sun Corporation hectically carried out its deliveries. Purchasing two new small-scale combat frigates, Tarou now had a total of five space-faring vessels under his command. Standing before Destroyer Plum— which remained the greatest source of income— President Tarou drew his mouth close to the ear of a female employee.

“Hm~? I can’t hear you. Can you speak up a bit?”

Tarou used his hands to cover his own ears. In the galactic empire that had no minimum age when it came to work, the young female worker in her early teens was a relatively natural sight. She timidly answered with a reddened face.

“Yes, um ks.”

On the female employee’s whispering voice, Tarou leaned his body forwards.

“I’m only confirmin’ our precious cargo here. So how about it? What’s written down on the list? Can you say it a bit louder?”

“Um... ad... ad...ult... a...”

“Hmm?”

“Adult... um...”

“HmMMM? What was that? This old man can’t hear you.”

“Erk... a... adult... ai... urgh...”

“Hahaa, s-see, your almost there. Just take a deep breaRMFANBOSS!!?”

Letting out a strange cry, Tarou crumbled onto the ground. Behind him stood Maar, the leg that delivered a fatal blow to his nether regions still raised.

“Why the hell are you boldly conduction sexual harassment in the middle of the day? Imperial law doesn’t have any provisions for harassment, but Station

Ordinance is different, you know?”

As Tarou pleaded for god, Maar looked down on him with eyes that seemed to be directed at trash. “You’re good, get on with your duties,” she told the female employee and shooed her away.

“Just what is this... ‘How to Use an Air Duster for Adults’... yeah? An air duster’s just an air duster, right? Really. Seriously, what’s with this? How exactly are you supposed to use it in a way that falls under the adult category... I’m actually curious. Is that what they were aiming for?”

Maar gave an unladylike frown as she gazed at the list display, before swiftly confirming the stock was correct. Each package loaded on the ship was furnished with its own exclusive electronic tag, so even if everything was mixed together, it was possible to obtain an accurate count. At first, they were half-installed by hand, but at present, the entire process had been automated. Maar had modified a cheap ship maintenance arm into a machine to attach the tags.

“Next is the Adela System, right? When I’d finally gotten back to Delta, we’re already off the next day. Delivery work’s no easy job... now then, what are you dilly dallying for, Teirow? Get up. You’ll be left behind.”

“N-no... it’s... you’re fault... my...”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ll be fine. You haven’t used them for close to twenty years, and I doubt you’ll get an opportunity to use them anytime soon. Now let’s go.”

Maar grabbed Tarou’s arm, half-dragging him towards the entrance of the Plum. Tarou let his body drag along as he continued raising words of objection at Maar’s manner of speech.

“Goddammit, one day you’re gonna be eatin’ those worddbgah!!”

Maar pinched his nose, and this time he chose to keep quiet.

—

“The jump drive count has begun, Mister Teirow.”

Koume’s inorganic voice resounded through the central control room. Tarou gave an, “Okay,” as he gazed at the decreasing digits on his BISHOP.

“Teirow, I’ll just confirm it again, but we really are going. You good?”

Raising her body from the seat she had grown quite accustomed to, Maar stared at Tarou. “From the of to the course,” he replied, sticking up his thumb.

“Of all else, I’m the guardian of the virgin world. There are people out there I have to protect. Then we’ve got to get ourselves out there. Right, Koume-san?”

As Tarou replied with as manly a face he could possibly muster, Koume raised her head from the operating panel.

“Mister Teirow. I do not quite understand, but have you discovered some sense of purpose from protecting the chastity of others? That is quite honestly repulsing.”

“Hmhm, say what you will. Ah, but you’ll heart my poor heart, so could you wrap it in some niceties, Koume-chan... by the way, these future-age adult contents are really somethin’. With these around, no one would need a girlfriend or wife, right? They’re crazy enough to make me seriously think about it. Especially the holographs. If you ignore the fact you can’t touch them, it’s no different then bein’ right in front of the real thing. With all the angles you can watch from, it moves my heart to no ends.”

“Hah... even if you call it the future, it’s the present to us. By the way, I think I’m seeing your goal here. You’re dragging everyone down with you.”

At Maar’s voice, Tarou raised the corners of his mouth in a grin. He slowly stood, spreading his arms out wide.

“Precisely!! The other day, Allan and I decided to found the Cosmic Virgin Alliance... fufu, pitiful empire. Our blessings shall lower birthrates across the galaxies, leaving nothing but a slow death as gentle as a strangling with silk floss.”

“Did you have some sort of grudge against the empire?”

“None. To be blunt, I’m just takin’ out my anger on them.”

To Tarou’s immediate response, Maar sent a face fed up from the depths of her heart, then a look of sympathy.

“... Well, if that’s what floats your boat. By the way, the Adela System functions around a fixed star, so be prepared for some terrible interference

from solar wind. Naturally, there has also been some WIND activity reported, and honestly I'm anxious that it'll turn out the same as last time."

"Yeah~, well, I get where you're coming from. But it's precisely because there are places no one wants to go that there's profit to be made, and our Rising Sun is the company that aims for that gap."

"Pretty much," said Maar. Rising Sun was a relatively rare transport company that owned a warship, and an enterprise that began its growth with 'carrying out the small trips big corporations won't take on' as its selling point. Tarou thought that if he would have to challenge large corporations head-on, then even if he had to push it a bit, concentrating on the troublesome danger zones where there weren't many rivals would be the 'safer' bet.

"We're carrying a rare haul of daily necessities this time, and maybe it's not so bad to transport some useful goods from time to time. Though half's porn as always."

"Porn is plenty useful to society!!"

"I cannot deny that, but the jump drive is about to activate, Mister Teirow."

Alongside Koume's lines, the entire ship began to shake. Tarou resolved himself for the headache and ringing in his ears he knew would come, deciding to gaze at the outside scenery tinting a light shade of blue. He had stopped spitting up as he had before, but that didn't change the fact he was no good with jumps.

... Jump Drive terminating. Arrived at destination point...

The fixed BISHOP announcement went by, his pale blue-dyed vision gradually melting into color. Tarou began to observe the shapes of the Plum's central command room his eyes had grown accustomed to as he disarmed the accident prevention system lock.

"... Alright, confirming coordinates. Any traces of jamming?"

"Positioning relative to fixed stars corresponds with destination coordinates. No obstructions from jamming. All systems green, Mister Teirow."

"Adela's stations 1 and 2 are both putting up beacons. No phase shifts. But

there's a ridiculous dosage of radiation flying our way, so it may be best to switch our scan radar over to optical."

"Good, good, let's do just that. No problems as usual. Then let's overdrive over to Adele Station 1."

It was an exchange they had already carried out a few dozen times. Satisfied at the two reports, Tarou swiftly operated the overdrive, settling in his seat to brace for a leap. The shaking ship sent him a large jolt, sending his body a long ways away. Eventually, the same jolt came again to signal the end. While it was actually the other way around, the display of the ship's outsides projected the station coming towards them at a high velocity.

"Eh? Wait. Aren't we a bit close?"

Even if they were decelerating for arrival, the station passed by the ship's flank at a dreadful rate. Eventually, the ship shook to a fault, settling down in a space you could call the station's immediate vicinity.

... Warning, danger of collision with large structure...

"Oh my, I never noticed. Well thanks for the warning. But we've already passed it... and this is bad!! Engines full throttle!!"

"We're already doing that!! Control our direction!!"

Tarou's BISHOP displayed the distance to the station. Its value was headed towards 0 at an alarming rate. The display showed the station grow bigger, carrying with it an ominous sense of oppression.

"Koume-san, why is the station the one that's moving!?"

In an attempt to slip out of the collision path, Tarou operated the position functions.

"Unknown, Mister Teirow. Not only the Adela Station, a majority of stations are capable of movement, but it is unprecedented for such a thing to occur without prior notice given to the government.

"This is Stardust! Teirow, detach us this instant! We're on a collision course!!"

On the voice coming in on the communication line, "Got it!" Tarou cried out and detached the Stardust joined in place of the Rockboy.

“Uwooooooah!!!! Koume-san, physical shielddd!!”

Even if he knew it was meaningless, Tarou bent his body back from the display. The station wall projected all over one of the screens. That monotonous pattern of windows and panels streamed towards them faster still.

“ChooaAAGAH!!?”

A strong impact raced through the ship. Maar let out a scream, while Koume fell to the ground.

... Joint mechanism damaged...

... Directional control thrusters 4 and 6 damaged...

... Ship positioning experiencing movement beyond calculations...

A large number of warnings flickered over his BISHOP. In his hazy head, Tarou understood the ship had collided with the station.

“Owow... curses, the ship is spinning... r-right. What about Allan? You alright?”

“This is Stardust. We were able to avoid it by a hair’s breadth, but it took off with some of our armor plating. The main system is safe.”

Tarou let out a breath of relief as he watched the long and narrow speed ship flying immediately to the Plum’s side. Positioned like a falcontaking a fifty meter nosedive, the Stardust carefully altered its course to avoid the metal it had let off itself.

“What’s goin’ on here. For the Plum’s first major damage to be a crash... can’t laugh at that one!!”

Tarou managed to negate the ship’s spin as he glared at the Station gradually drifting away.

“Mister Teirow. We are in a bit of a crisis.”

While Tarou checked the cargo to see if it had suffered any damage, Koume sent a level-headed voice. He exchanged a glance with Maar, waiting for the AI to go on.

“I have made a number of attempts, but I cannot connect to the neuralnet. It does seem we are stranded.”

Chapter 24

On Koume's words, Tarou and Maar lost their voices.

"Can't connect to the network... was it because of that crash?"

Koume shook her mechanical head.

"No, Mister Teirow. There were symptoms before we entered this star system. Therefore, it is hard to conclude solar winds as the cause. I thought it was a rare connection error, but that does not seem to be the case."

"I'll try another network," Maar said.

"I can connect to the solar system's network. The station's local is still live. What does that mean? Only the neuralnet is down?"

Maar made a baffled face, "Hello, this is DD-4649 Plum, DD-4649 Plum," she started calling the control tower.

"Koume, conduct a wide-range scan. Little Teirow-chan over here has a reeaall bad feeling about this."

Receiving Tarou's words, Koume quickly initiated a scan. The optical scanner could only analyze the light it picked up, so it was generally helpful when in immediate danger. But as it couldn't look through obstacles like the electromagnetic scanner, it had little use in environments filled with numerous. The information you could get from it was limited.

"Mister Teirow, I detect no other ships in the area. But there is a point of interest."

Koume's overinflated tone. Determining there was an important answer coming, the two turned towards her.

"The amount of debris in the area is 440 times over the estimate obtained from the population mean value. It was either some large-scale accident or something worse."

On those calmly spoken words, Tarou instantly prepared for battle. At present, there weren't any enemies around, but there was no harm in keeping on guard.

"Teirow, I connected to the station's control tower... aah, how could this be... Teirow. Let's get out of here at once. This station's unmanned."

Tarou turned a blank face to Maar.

"... What? Eh? By unmanned, you mean it's empty?"

"Right... I just accessed the solar system to confirm it, and I got an audio clip about everyone escaping and evacuating. I'll send it over to you, but you'd better brace yourself."

Without waiting for an answer, she instantly sent it to his BISHOP. That voice mixed in with terrible noise he thought to be the influence of the solar winds reached his ears.

"... s Adela Station on... Management committee. I repeat. This is Adela Station One Management committee. We... ceived an attack from numerous WIND, and our self-defense force was eliminated. Now... before they... decided to... abandon Station. We are still unable to... to the ne... network. Evacuating to SG... argate. The station was... en over. I rep... the station was taken over. The station has been put on a trajectory straight towards the star and..... over."

Tarou silently listened to the recording. After playing it a second and third time to remove the noise, he raised his pale face.

"Taken over... a station was? By the WIND?"

"That's what they said. Koume, can you calculate the station's trajectory?"

"Yes, Miss Maar. Please wait a... finished. It does seem the station is on a path towards the star Adela. Is this the WIND's doing?"

Koume tilted his face as he spoke. "No idea," said Tarou.

"I don't know what's what. But since they had their homes taken, isn't this their last bit of resistance? I heard the army never comes out to the sticks, after all."

Tarou's words sunk the ship into silence. After a while, Maar opened her

mouth.

“Anyways, we should get out of here while we can. There’s a possibility there are WIND in that station, right? It’ll mean we’re canceling the job, but with how things are, there’s no helping it.”

“Yeah, you’re right... this is Plum. Alan, is your drive equipment fine? Can you jump?”

“This is Stardust. Yeah, we’re fine, admiral. Which stargate should we jump towards?”

“Yeah, honestly, I don’t really want to get involved, but I’m curious, so how about we go towards their evacuation point?”

“Understood. But I don’t recommend it. There’s a possibility they may still be in battle.”

“You’re right about that,” said Tarou to Allan. He changed the display to view the Plum, letting out a sigh as he gazed at the flashily banged up portions.

“But whatever circumstance they have, I’ve got to go bitch at *someone*, right? If they ran away, they could have at least turned off their beacon. If we were just a few seconds off, we’d have been in pieces, you know?”

Maar nodded at those words.

“You have a point... Even if we can’t legally demand reparations, we can have them take responsibility. Let’s drag them to court and knock ‘em dead.”

“Ah, it’s been a while since I’ve heard someone say knock ‘em dead.”

“If Miss Maar hears that from an iceman like you, that will only worsen her standing, Mister Teirow. Whatever the case, if we are going, we had best make it quick. I cannot think there will be any benefit from loitering around here.”

“Well you’re right,” said Tarou as he started up the overdrive device. With a sidelong glance to Maar’s, “And what’s that supposed to mean!?” he played back the recording from the station again.

“Staticky as always... hmm?”

Within the noise, he felt a faint sense of unease.

“Teirow, we’re all ready. I’ll start up the overdrive.”

“Ah, no. Give me a minute. I think I’m hearing something.”

With his unease at the base, Tarou concentrated his nerves on his ears. There, Maar said, “Why not use our analysis device?” sending a function across BISHOP.

“As expected of the future. We don’t need sonarmen or anythin’ anymore.”

As Tarou raised a voice of admiration, Maar informed him, “That isn’t the case.”

“The analysis results will just be a list of information, so if you want to analyze it in the truest sense, you still need people after all. Not unlike your info analysis capabilities, there are humans out there able to draw more accurate information than any sound analyzer apparatus.”

The info from the sound analysis spread across Tarou’s BISHOP, with countless entries of organized data displayed. Tarou noticed there were two, ‘Voice track’ categories, and cried out, “Bingo!”

“It really was there... you have some good ears. So our ancestors really did have high physical capabilities?”

In regards to Maar’s surprise, “Lay off, future girl,” Tarou returned. Pushing his ear against a small hearing aid, he started up the extracted sound track.

“... gency, Emergency. This is... ela Station One. If anyone can hear me, please res... d. Emergency, emergency...”

The sound mixed in with noise. What seemed to come from a young woman made Tarou feel a sense of compassion. He didn’t know if people developed much attachment to their home stations, but being chased from a place one had become accustomed to was definitely not a good feeling.

“That’s enough, let’s go. They were just making an emergency call... I hope they got out alright.”

Tarou spoke with a bit of a sullen face. There, Maar called over, “Wait.”

“Emergency call? I don’t hear anything like that. They’ve just been answering the station number... let me connect to the ship speaker.”

By Maar's hand, the sound output was sent to the room. The sound gradually growing in volume streamed through the speaker alongside the noise.

"Please. Someone... me. This is Block KH-3352. The WIND is... ng. The other districts have already..... receiver is breaking do... someone..."

Once the sound went past its recorded time, the room returned to silence. "That's strange," Maar raised her voice.

"That was a different one from the one I heard as well. Was that what you got, Teirow?"

"Mnh. It's not. When I analyzed, she was going emergency, emergency."

"It's not? Then what could... wait, no!!"

Maar opened her eyes wide as she stood. A moment later, Tarou realized as well, "Oy, oy, oy, oy!!" he raised a flustered voice.

"You mean that's not part of the recording!? There's someone still out there!?"

"Koume!! Calculate the origin of the signal!!"

"Understood, Miss Maar... I digress in this confirmation, but there is a high likelihood of WIND threat in that station. Do you still intent to rush to their rescue?"

The two turned their faces to Koume.

"Obviously!!"

"Isn't it obvious!!?"

Two voices resounded through the room simultaneously, followed by a space of silence.

"... Yes, understood. Miss Maar. Mister Teirow. Block KH-3352 is joined to the bridge on the port side of the station. I sent a signal point."

As Koume said it, the corresponding part of the station flashed blue on the display.

"Thank you, Koume. Engines full throttle. Set course straight ahead. Maar, I know it'll probably be hopeless, but try getting in touch from our side. And

calling Stardust. Do you have a grasp of the situation?”

“This is Stardust. Yeah, heard you loud and clear. I’ve also received the signal coordinates. If it’s speed, then I’ve got you beat. Should I go ahead?”

“This is Plum. It’d be a big help if you could. If you find any enemies, avoid them and send the information over to us.”

“This is Stardust. Understood. Then let’s do this.”

Spitting a long tail of light, the Stardust steadily accelerated away. Its engine output relative to its mass was incomparable to the Plum, letting it achieve acceleration several times over.

“Now then, se should prepare for battle ourselves.”

Tarou readied himself for his first battle in a while as he began mobilizing the combat information in his head.

Chapter 25

The distant Stardust. Once it had reached a distance difficult to confirm with the naked eye, Allan's voice came across the line.

"This is Stardust. I've reached the 2km point from the destination. I'm beginning my approach."

"This is Plum, Stardust, approach approved. Exercise the utmost caution."

As Tarou sent Allan a reply, he began testing out the new direction control program he had written up. Destroyer plum unsteadily swayed to and fro as it returned to its original trajectory.

"We can make use of approximately 80% of our original maneuverability, Mister Teirow."

Tarou gave a satisfied nod to Koume's calculations. In that previous crash, the Plum had lost two directional control thrusters, so in order for the other thrusters to compensate, he had to finely tune their handling outputs.

"Maar, did you get through?"

"It's no good," Maar shook her head.

"I think there's might be some sort of interference with their receiver. She got a response to her last transmission, so I don't think it's a problem with the hardware..."

As Maar raised a groan, "Got it. Keep tryin' for now," said Tarou.

"Even so, the solar wind interference is huge... our beams'll probably curve terribly. Koume, could you look up the expected influence of the radiation? I'll try calculatin' it too, so let's see if we get somewhere close."

"Understood, Mister Teirow. But I plead that you do not rely on Koume too much. Honestly, I am lacking in confidence."

On Koume's unexpected words, Tarou couldn't help but raise a hysteric,

“aEeh!?” To Koume’s side, Maar showed a similar look of surprise, turning her face to peer into her mechanical face.

“Oy, oy, what’s wrong, Koume-san? That didn’t sound like you at all. What’s wrong? Facin’ a midlife crisis ‘er somethin’?”

“Negative, Mister Teirow. I cannot say whether an AI has a sense of being, but I am perfectly... ah, no, I mean it is highly likely I am functioning under perfectly normal conditions. The problem lies in the connection to the neuralnet.”

“Connection? Well, you did say something about that. But it’s not like you’re some household security guard who can’t live without the net, so where’s the problem?”

“There is nothing but problems, Mister Teirow,” Koume turned her face. Her expressionless mechanical eyes took Tarou in.

“The memory loaded onto Koume may certainly be considered extensive when compared to a standard AI. But if you compare it to the vast amount of information you can find on the neuralnet, it is but a trivial amount. Meaning I cannot make conclusions grounded on certain information or various calculations as I have to this point. Regrettable as it may be, Koume in a disarray from the present situation, and even in concerns irrelevant to available information, I feel doubt at the integrity of my decisions. There are no problems with my logic paths, and I detect no abnormality with any of my loaded knowledge mechanisms. The probability of serial error in the tunnel effect of my quantum circuit is...”

“Wai– wait, stop, time out. I’m sorry, I have absolutely no idea what you’re talkin’ about. If possible, could you make it simple enough trash like me could understand?”

As it seemed Koume would only go on and on, Tarou went and stuck his mouth in. To that, Maar raised an eyebrow, “Uum,” she went on.

“In short, Koume is, ‘anxious,’ right?”

Koume spun her head towards Maar’s voice.

“Anxious... yes, that it correct. An exceedingly precise term to express Koume’s present state. As expected of Miss Maar. That is right, Koume feels

extremely anxious.”

On Koume’s answer, the two humans exchanged a glance.

“Umm, is it that? Someone who’s been takin’ exams with a perfect cheat sheet up to now suddenly had it taken away?”

“Your example’s way too negative, but that sounds about right.”

Tarou had a vague understanding of Koume’s circumstance, but that didn’t mean he had any idea what to do about it. As he scratched his head in perplexion, “Please tell me,” Koume opened her mouth.

“Mister Teirow. When put into this sort of situation, in what manner does a human take action?”

Looking up at Tarou, Koume intently focused her eyes.

“In what manner... well, you just gotta do your best, right?”

“Now that’s just careless,” Maar grimaced. She continued on to say, “But maybe you’re right.” She gave a bitter smile.

“Nah, I know I’m right. Hey, Koume, just have a look at me. The other day, I should’ve been seekin’ out indolence in my peaceful life, but by the time I noticed it, I was in some random spaceship driftin’ through the macrocosm of space. You’ll do just fine. What’s this about the neuralnet? Of course you may be anxious, but it’s all gonna work out. That’s how we humans go about it.”

Tarou answered as he pointed at Koume. “Not that it actually resolves anythin’!” he proudly stuck out his chest and stuck up his thumb.

“So that is what the humans... do... understood. In that case...”

Koume turned back towards the display in front of her.

“Koume shall do her best. Mister Teirow, I will send the results of the calculation over to you.”

Tarou exchanged a smile with Maar, his eyes scanning through the results coming in from Koume. The calculations didn’t deviate far from his own estimates, yet they were clearly much more precise.

“Hmhmm, that’s how it’s gotta be. Allan, what’s your situation?”

A voice came across the line to answer Tarou's call.

"This is Stardust. Admiral, it's just as you said. I picked up a manual semaphore SOS. It seems there are a number of people still shut up inside. Presumed number is close to the triple digits. Now taking measures for rescue."

The three on the Plum looked at one another and nodded.

"This is Plum. Thanks for that. Any signs of a threat apart from WIND?"

"This is Stardust. Can't really tell... ah, no. The information just came in. There are a number of WIND crafts on the station's interior dock, it says. There's a high probability they'll jump out if they notice us."

"This is Plum. Understood. We'll reach in around 4 and a half minutes."

"This is Stardust. You'd better hurry up, Admiral. The Stardust is a master of running away, but battle's a bit iffy."

"Yeah, got it." He answered as he glared fixatedly on the distant station's details the camera was finally able to capture. As they were chasing that cylindrical station from behind, from their side, it looked like a white dish.

"Mn, what's that?"

The moment he zoomed into that dish-like circle, he caught sight of a streak-like white line extending from the station.

"Mister Teirow, the optical scanners have captured two moving objects. From the locking dog on your righthand side."

"Just caught sight of it myself. I doubt it'll do anythin', but try sendin' an identification signal."

"No response from identification signal, only the Stardust sent anything back."

"As I thought... lock-on and fire some warning shots. It may be a waste, but we can't have them goin' towards Stardust. Be careful not to hit the station."

Tarou said as he swiftly locked onto the two targets, firing a volley with all turrets at once. As he wasn't calculating for the radiation, gravity or any other variables, they were complete shots in the dark, but they displayed ample effect

in drawing the enemy's attention.

"Enemy responses have turned course towards us. Their acceleration is exceedingly high, they are likely small-scale crafts."

"Okay, then let's load the next one."

From the enemy's course and the strength of the solar winds, Tarou recalculated the presumed correct angles to fire his beams, immediately sending it to the blast control devices.

"Wah, we hit on the first shot!! What's this, Koume, we're perfectly fine after all!"

The direct hit from the beam stopped the WIND in its tracks. As Maar raised her voice, "Thank you," Koume called back.

"You normally wouldn't hit at this range. Aah, so they're not considering the influence of the radiation themselves?"

The remaining WIND fired on the Plum, but its beams received the influence of the solar winds, drawing gentle curves as they strayed from the ship. In the end, until it was destroyed by the Plum's bombardment, that ship was unable to land a single hit.

"Guess that just goes to show humans are still more flexible than AI. Though it might've been different if the enemy had someone like Koume."

Maar let out a relieved sigh.

"Don't say such scary things, Maar. If all our enemies were Koume, then humanity wouldn't have a future... whoah, what's this!!"

The three dimensional radar produced on the display from the optical scan. What caught Tarou's eyes was an unbelievable amount of moving objects.

"Mister Teirow, there are 22 hostile responses. Correction, 24 hostile responses. It may be accurate to say those previous ones were recon drones."

"Wheeh, I don't like where this is headed, but numerically, we're around the same place as we were none too long ago... ah, no, the situation is different. This is bad."

“What do you mean different? Right now, it looks like the solar winds are on our side.”

“You’re right about that, Maar-tan. But the Thunderbolt model’s armor and turrets are all concentrated on the front. Retreating back while firing is one thing, but what’ll happen if we’re the ones advancing?”

On Tarou’s explanation, “I see,” said Maar.

“It would be troublesome if they flocked around us from all sides... understood. At present, there’s no trace of them using a warp jammer, so I’ll make it so we’re ready to jump at any time.”

“Good idea,” went Tarou. He confirmed the WIND ships spreading out in all directions on his monitor as he cocked his head over what was going on.

“Well for now, we can only do our best.”

Gazing at the encroaching points, Tarou let out a deep sigh.

Chapter 26

“Mister Teirow, 60 seconds to contact.”

“Got it, Koume. Set course forward to the right. Cut the engines. Rotate front 30 degrees left. We’re going to delay our contact time.”

Tarou tilted the ship’s course to the right as he slanted its body left. From the enemy’s point of view, it would look as if the Plum was sliding diagonally.

“Plum to Stardust. How are things on your side? Any progress?”

“This is Stardust. Progress is progress, but things aren’t looking too favorable. Since we couldn’t use the bridge, I had them board directly in spacesuits, but this lot doesn’t seem too used to it.”

“This is Plum, understood. I’m sure you’ve noticed, but the enemy’s beginnin’ to swarm its way out. You should probably hurry.”

“This is Stardust. Yeah, I know. Another 15 minutes, and everyone’ll be accommodated. Good luck out there.”

At the voice leaking through the communication device, Tarou knit his brow. In daily life, 15 minutes passed before you noticed it, but in battle it felt several times its length.

“Luck, eh... I’m pretty sure this situation itself is unlucky, dammit. All turrets commence fire. We’ll reliably take them out one by one.”

From the beam diffusion by the radiation, the firing exchange commenced at a closer range than usual.8 beams let off a blue light as they raced through the void of space, eventually disappearing into nothingness.

“Damn, the flares are unstable. The dose isn’t reachin’ a constant.”

Tarou clicked his tongue at the strong light of the star Adela as he amended his aiming calculations. By the time the next breath of beams locked onto their targets, the spread out enemy crafts had begun their fire.

“Uheh!! It goes without sayin’ a date’s one on one. Like ‘ell I can take on so many at once!!”

While he escaped the first shots of the close-to-20 enemy beams, their gradually correcting shells had begun to take in the hull of the Plum.

“Maar, can you jam it?”

“I’ll have a go,” answered Maar. Bought with a portion of their proceeds, the Plum’s beam jammer started up and began to curve the trajectory of beams flying towards it.

“Oh, this is nice. Periodically raise the output so you don’t put too much stress on the equipment. We should be able to buy quite some time with it. Koume-chan, I’m leaving the shield’s control to you.”

The remaining shield value that would have run out long ago under normal circumstance continued to display a number close to 90%, causing Tarou to let out a sigh of relief. When Koume maintained the shield, she suppressed the battery consumption to its absolute minimum by invoking it only in necessary amounts.

“She sure does a good job managing those ridiculously difficult beam shields... as expected of our all-purpose AI Koume-sama.”

If the shield loaded on the ship was fully deployed and run continuously, it wouldn’t even take 30 seconds for the battery to run dry. The shield wasn’t something to constantly keep up like a barrier, it was something to activate for only the brief moment an enemy attack collided.

The intensity of the diffused beams didn’t tie in directly to the battery expenditure; whatever shield strength you specified upon activation was deducted from the battery supply. Meaning regardless of whether the beam’s output was 10 or 100, if you kept the shield strength at 100, it would use up energy all the same. 10 for 10 and 100 for 100. Deploying such a shield was the ideal. But with firing angle and placement, alongside numerous dampening factors, calculating out the adequate number was said to be exceedingly difficult..

“Thank you, Mister Teirow. But once you grow accustomed to it, it is no trouble at all.”

On Koume's voice, "Don't ask for the impossible," Tarou gave a bitter smile. While it was certainly possible for him, she was keeping up a shield against the chaotic firings of over 20 crafts. The mere imagination of such work made Tarou think he would go mad.

"Mister Teirow. The foe is merely regulating fire based on the position difference between their blaster and target. Why not try moving the ship irregularly?"

"Yeah, I don't think that's a bad idea, but I'll refrain for now. When the battery's looking bad, maybe I'll turn the beam jammer off and try it. For now, let's prioritize the accuracy of our own shots."

"I see. Understood, Mister Teirow. Enemies 6 and 9 have been silenced. 7 is in good health, but it can be surmised it is using some form of jamming."

"I see. Then lets put it off to later. We'll prioritize cuttin' down their numbers."

"Hey, Teirow, the number of enemy signals on the radar hasn't changed at all. Isn't this bad?"

On Maar's voice, Tarou frantically checked the display. Sure enough, as he glared at the numbers, the responses went up by three. Regardless of the Plum's attempts to shoot them down.

"Damn, they're coming out from the other side of the station. This is why optical scans are... should we buy a stabilizer next time?"

"Our cargo hold's narrow as it is, and you're making it even smaller. As a delivery company, I'm not sure what to think about that."

"Is that conversation not one you can put off to a later date, Mister Teirow. Miss Maar. The remaining shield will soon reach half capacity, but our expected battle time has yet to reach its halfway point. This is not a very favorable situation."

On Koume's level voice, "So it really is rough," muttered Tarou. A number of beam-spewing foes were inflicting their attacks to surround the Plum, and at point blank range, they continued displaying a high level of accuracy. The battleship had already shot down over 10 enemies, but it didn't seem their

numbers were decreasing at all.

“This is Plum. Allan, how are things going? We’re in a bit of a pickle over here.”

“This is Stardust. Sorry, but we’re behind schedule. At present, around 30% have boarded. It’s becoming quite a pain because we don’t have any child-sized spacesuits.”

“Child-sized... wait, they left children behind?”

“Yeah, let’s see. They’re not all kids, but they’re all little ones. According to their words, they were given priority evacuation to the control tower, but an accident sealed off the exits. When trying to save the kids first backfires, it’s the sort of tale that makes you curse god.”

On Allan’s report, a silence descended upon the Plum.

“... Hey, Koume. After the Shield reaches zero, how long will the Plum be able to fight?”

Tarou muttered his words as he conducted the necessary calculations for battle. Koume looked up at Tarou and opened her mouth.

“Unknown, Mister Teirow. Once the Shield is gone, we will have to rely on the armor plating, but it is not as if the entire ship is protected by it. If you want to know the amount of time we can remain floating here, then that is a considerable amount, but if you want to preserve fighting strength for another battle, it is a different story. I believe it will largely depend on luck.”

“Got it,” said Tarou. After turning an eye to the continually decreasing shield levels he steadied his resolve.

“Seal off all the blocks besides the ship’s center. There’ll be explosions if there’s any air left in them. Put all our remaining shields towards protecting the engine.”

Did she feel the intent behind Tarou’s words? Maar gave a quiet, “Got it.” After some time, a silence descended upon the ship, giving rise to the sounds of heavy doors slamming shut in the distance.

“Hah... I’m sure all the uncushioned packages will be ruined. Even if there’s no

helpin' it, this is a huge loss."

"Right... but money's something you can always earn again. Life is irreplaceable. Enemy 20's destruction confirmed. But our foe's idiocy really saved us this time. If they all attack at once, wouldn't it be the end?"

"That it would. But they're only taking a simple action of approach and shoot. If they got around to taking coordinated action, then that really would shake up the empire."

"If it came to that, we would enter quite an unwelcomed era, Mister Teirow. Now the shield is about to run dry. Do your best, the two of you."

Tarou and Maar sent a grin. Without them taking any particular actions, the shield levels reached zero, bringing a strong tremor across the ship.

"Erk!! Just not havin's shields rattles us up this much!!?"

Feeling as if he had been smacked in the face, Tarou strongly gripped his seat. The display went haywire for a moment before returning to normal.

"Damage to top armor plating, damage level 4. Turret 3 damaged. It looks like one of the barrels was burnt up, but it can still fire."

"Got it. Koume, if one of them uses a warp jammer, let me know at once. We'll have to take it out first or we'll be space refuse."

"Yes, understood Mister Teirow. Enemy 25 shot down, 12 remains silent. Remaining backup shield: 85%."

Tarou grit his teeth at the repeated impacts. Maar raised a small scream. The three of them awaited Allan's report as they simply fought on in earnest. Firing and using jamming, they took evasive maneuvers. The points on the radar showed a jumbled mess surrounding the Plum, giving the impression of a pitiful man who poked the hornet nest.

... Hull Damage: 30% Yellow Alert...

A warning flashed across BISHOP. From somewhere, a painful explosive sound reached Tarou's ear.

"Mister Teirow, the wall around block 4 has been damaged. Cargo 3 has been lost. Enemies 34 and 28 remain silent. Enemy number has increased to 42

crafts. Abnormality found in regulating mechanism of backup shield. Changing to manual operation.”

Koume’s eyes restlessly scanned over the screen as her hands began operating the device at a speed nigh impossible for any human. From there, a conspicuously large vibration. And the sound of an explosion.

“Turret two was blown off, barrels and all. The entire area around it’s all red (unable to function)! Teirow, we’re at our limit!!”

“Dammit, Allan!! You there yet!!? We can’t hold out over here!!”

Tarou screamed across the communication line.
At that point, 13 minutes and 30 seconds had passed since the battle had initiated. Yet the remaining minute and a half to his goal felt an eternity away.

Chapter 27

The rising inferno. The ignited oxygen tank detached from the Plum, and after drifting a while, it offered a flashy explosion.

(We've already don plenty. The Plum's at its limits.)

He took a glance at the blue, glowing block of the overdrive activation function.

(What good it is to me, savin' some brats I don't even know.)

Tarou thought. Even making off with just the people loaded right now was an action worth plenty of praise. Even if he ran away here, just who in the cosmos had the right to judge him?

"Aah, dammit!! It hurts, and I'm scared!! Screwin' around 'ere!!"

Blood flowed from his forehead as Tarou howled out. The impact from the second turret being blown off smacked him into the display with more than enough force to tear up his brow.

... Ship damage: 60% Red Alert...

The last warning rung out, the room enveloped in the yellow emergency lights. Barely managing to contain his urge to hild his head, Tarou cried out at the display.

"Allan!!!!"

"Teirow, jump!! Boarding complete!! Boarding complete!!"

The report he had waited for. The BISHOP screen that was supposed to exist directly in his brain was shaking from the tension. The screen that was supposed to be blue was wrapped up in a tasteless world of monochrome. As a man falling down a cliff reaches a hand up to the sky, he reached an unseen hand towards the function block displayed as, 'hyperspace_Cruising'.

"Take that!! It's our win!!"

The space around the plum was cut off and wrapped in silence. The enlarging packet of space connected to their reserved destination point, the form of the ship changing to a long arrow of light several kilometers across.

... Overdrive activated...

As if to pierce through, almost to steal away all of one's senses, a high-pitched noise.

"Hah... hah..."

Within the silence, Tarou's rough breath resounded through the command room. With bloodshot eyes, Maar slowly turned her face, directing her eyes towards the walls and ceiling.

"Haha... hahaha..."

A dry laugh escaped outside of his awareness. Tarou casually stripped off his belt, laying himself down against the hard floor.

"Ahaha... ah ha ha ha!!!!"

Tarou raised a maddened laugh. Before long, Maar and eventually even Koume joined in, the three of them laughing to tears.

"Uhehe!! We're alive. We're alive, goddammit!! We did it!! Uheha! Why did I push myself so hard, I wonder!!"

"Ahaha, we really are alive. Really. I feel like an idiot. I wonder why."

"Fufu, precisely. Did you have a fellow iceman on that station or something?"

"Gehaha!! No way in 'ell. I've got no one in the cosmos, and Koume, you should know that best."

"Ehehe, right. But the same goes to me. I've got no family either!!"

"What a coincidence. The truth is, Koume does not have a family as well. Looks like we have found some nice companions to be alone with."

Looked on from the side, it seemed as if the three had gone mad. The masses of adrenaline secreted in battle circulated through their bodies, and eventually it went out.

"... Allan. Hey, Allan. Are the children safe?"

Touching his ear to the bloodstained communication device, Tarou quietly muttered.

“Yeah, all 112 of them are fine. A few of them re malnourished, but a good meal, some rest, and they’ll be right as rain. When the jump is over, I’ll send the video feed over.”

“I see... that’s... good... tell them to make good use of Rising Sun’s services when they grow up.”

Falling back onto the reinforced titanium floor, Tarou lay face up. “What’s with that,” Maar held her knees as she gave a small laugh.

“I never should’ve went and played hero on the fly like that. Honestly, I’m in tatters over here.”

“True... but I feel real good right now.”

“You too, Miss Maar? Koume feels so as well. This means there was some worth to exerting ourselves.”

On Koume’s voice, the two showed a grin.

“Now we’re almost about to land. Teirow, You better get back in your seat, or your wounds’ll open up.”

... Overdrive terminating, arriving at destination...

Receiving a notice from BISHOP, Tarou looked at the ship’s exterior through the cameras that still functioned. A large, cylindrical stargate was projected on the display, and he was able to confirm a number of vessels floating around it.

“Mn... They’re acting a bit strange.”

In the depths of the ships casually floating around the gate, a perfect lattice of countless vessels entered his eyes, and Tarou had a hunch.

“That’s... a defensive grid formation... is it the empire?”

The memories overwritten into his brain notified him of the identity of the fleet before him.

“Mister Teirow. An exceedingly strong warp jamming signal is being exuded by the fleet in front. All systems red.”

Tarou immediately confirmed it. The warnings flowing across BISHOP left him at a loss for words.

... Overdrive system jammed: RED...
... Lock-on system jammed: RED...
... Engine propulsion system jammed: RED...
... Scan system jammed: RED...
... Shield augmentation system jammed: RED...
... Direction control system jammed: RED...

The minute vibrating sounds of the engine quietly faded from the control room, plunging it even further into silence.

... Overdrive system HACKED...
... Lock-on system HACKED...
... Engine propulsion system HACKED...
... Scan system HACKED...
... Shield augmentation system HACKED...
... Direction control system HACKED...

It took a mere two seconds for the notices to switch over. The ship's engine started up once more, moving them in a direction outside of Tarou's control. While Tarou opened his mouth blankly, the control of the ship had been completely robbed from him.

"This is imperial navy detachment CC-110. We have completely seized control of your ship. Imperial citizen registration ID 25314312326869 Teirow Ichijoh, representative of Rising Sun Corp. On board ship Alba DD-4649 Plum. Is there any discrepancy?"

The low voice of a man came across the line. Tarou had no memory of turning the communication device on to begin with, and he inferred the central systems of the ship had already been seized.

"Yeah, yeah, that's exactly right. What might you need from us? Pure, noble and indecent. That's the motto our company runs on. I haven't done anything to get myself encircled by the military."

Tarou murmured at the device. "What do you mean by indecent," Maar glared at him, but he decided to ignore it.

“Teirow. I have not requested any report from you. I’ll be looking into your ship’s records.”

On those cold words, “Oh, that so? Then that makes things easier,” Tarou slouched into his chair. He felt strong approval towards Maar’s words of, “This guy doesn’t sound like good news.” After that, including Koume, who’d remained silent to that point, the three of them waited in silence for a response.

“... Hurry it up. The hell are they doin’?”

Tarou cut his numbness with a complaint. By the ship’s timepiece, close to 10 minutes had passed, and it was right time his stomach began to hurt from the tension.

“Since our communication system was seized, we can’t make a call from out side... ah, no wait, is it the opposite? Are we still patched through?”

“Erk, in that case, did he hear my slander...”

“Of course I heard it, but let’s just pretend I didn’t. I’m sorry to keep you waiting. A provisional ruling has just been handed down regarding your treatment. Teirow-dono, Maar-dono, Koume-dono. I apologize for my initial treatment. You are a crew of heroes.”

On the completely changed voice that came across the line, the three exchanged a glance.

“The army’s demands and information regarding its further treatment of you has been sent to your BISHOP. Based on your answer, an unfortunate end may be in store, but I expect good news.”

“Now that’s quite a threat,” Tarou muttered as he scanned through the army report.

“Hmhhh... first, hand over the rescued children. Well that one’s obvious. Next is... duty of confidentiality. Yeah, that’s simple. Wait, all of it? We can’t say a single word about this incident?”

Rather than asking, Tarou sought confirmation. “Right,” Maar continued on.

“That’s what the contract says. Hey, officer. I’ve no intent to go around

bragging about our heroics, but it will be painful if we can't at least use this publicity to make up our losses. I would be quite delighted if you could take that into consideration."

Maar addressed it to no one in particular. "Give me a minute," an answer immediately came from the communication device.

"I had them increase your cash reward. I'm sending over an updated contract."

On the voice that came in once more, Maar silently stuck up her thumb. The new contract contents that showed up over their BISHOP displayd the revised portions in red.

"As expected of our minister of finance. With this we've gotten a bit of a prof... ones, tens, hundreds, thousands..."

Tarou began counting the monetary reward on his fingers. By the point he reached the hundred million column, the sheer shock halted his thought process.

Chapter 28

“Two hundred eighty... million credits?”

280,000,000crd.

A sum he had never laid eyes on to that point. Even including the sudden rise in transport costs and the bonus they got from delivering to danger zones, the profits one could expect from a single transport were generally in the low millions. The price of the Plum was just short of 40 million.

“8 million for the WIND subjugation... adding on the confidentiality bonus, 80 million... and 200 million for handing over the children. That settles it. Those kids were definitely related to the government or army. Not that I have any intent to pry into it.”

“Hm, a wise decision, Maar-dono. I don’t recommend any further investigation.”

A reply instantly came from the transmitter. “That ain’t just a recommendation,” Tarou gave a bitter smile.

“I’m sure I need not explain any further, but as regulations go, I seek verbal confirmation. By no means will you disclose this chain of events, and no further questions will be recognized. This contract is to take immediate effect, and from its contents, you are to report all damages as part of the occupational hazard of delivery. If you are to infringe upon this contract, the penalty is uncertain, but it will likely involve the drafting of a high-priority assassination plan. Did you get all of that?”

“Yeah, fine. But you know, is there anyone out there with a hard enough heart to say no after hearing that much?”

“Fufu, you’re an interesting man. Sure enough, no one’d ever be able to refuse after... no, I guess there’s one.”

On that unexpected response, “There is?” Tarou’s ears perked up.

“That man called the Phantom’s thrust a no at us before. He had quite some pluck standing against the empire. You’ve got a former military man on that small ship over there, right? Try asking him about it. Well then, the contract’s been tied.”

Alongside the severing of the line, the systems were freed one after the next.

“The stargate is operational. You’re free to do whatever you want after the jump. I do hope we never have to meet again. For both of our sakes.”

Dyeing blue, his vision began to shake.

“That’s my line!!”

A sensation similar to falling unconscious. After screaming out his last words, Tarou found he had already been transported to an unfamiliar space.

“... Now then, let’s go home.”

After confirming the Stardust a step behind, Tarou gave a worn out murmur. He heard two voices of approval.

... Docking complete. Welcome to Delta Station...

Under the instruction of that fixed announcement, the Plum finished docking at its designated bridge. Those who saw the ship’s wreckage sent inquisitive eyes, their looks inquiring as to what had transpired.

“Welcome back, president. But you’re sure made a mess of yourself... Even brats in their rebellious phase return home in better shape than that.”

One of the employees who went out to the station gate to greet them looked over the Plum with an expression of true amazement.

“I’d appreciate if you don’t ask what happened. Us men you see, we’ve all got a secret or two to keep for ourselves.”

“Yeah, yeah, how hardboiled. We’ve been put under confidentiality so we can’t say anything, but don’t worry. All three of us are fine, and we didn’t suffer any financial loss.”

“Just like that!!?”

After the three of them dropped by the office, they gave some adequate

greetings before holing up in their rooms. Speaking to distance, they had gone a length too long to feel real, but to Tarou who could use his jump drive as part of a Corp, his journey hadn't even lasted two days. The agitation of battle still remained, and upon returning to the station, he had decided to take it easy. But...

"... I'm bored."

Tarou grumbled. From the difference in civilization and thought, he didn't know where he was supposed to laugh at the future comedy program. As a majority of his living was done on the ship, there was barely anything in the apartment he'd rented near the office.

"To be blunt, we don't need this place... should I cancel my contract?"

A few months had gone by since he first started living on the station, but even now, it was rare for him to ever go out alone. It was true he boasted a natural shut-in nature, but it was largely because he couldn't determine what was dangerous and what was safe. It wasn't only once or twice that he found himself a step away from becoming a slab of meat after unintentionally treading on the high-speed vehicle lane.

"In the first place, it's way too drab. This station. All the movement's done by high-speed vehicles without any windows, and all shopping's mail order these days. There's no color in this damn place."

Picturing those egg-shaped high-speed vehicles in his head, Tarou's mind turned to the shop Allan and Maar had brought him out to. As free space and natural vegetation was considered a luxury, the cost of spending a moment in that small park-like space was no different than that of a professional spirit-healing massage joint that alleviated stiffness in various places. Even now, he could remember his shock upon learning that fact.

"If you've got to choose between park and massage, you'd normally go for the massage, right... m-maybe I should have a go myself."

Tarou raised his body. He began shining the sterilizing ultra-violet light over his body. After exposing himself just as long as instructed in the manual, he'd have to bathe himself in the shower that forcefully shut itself off after five minutes. Truthfully, he wanted to take a bath, but water was a valuable

commodity on the station.

“O-okay, this old man’s going for it... ah, should I make a reservation first? I’ll try googling... oh wait, would you still say google in this era? Searching, searching... ah, the neuralnet’s still down. Maybe the star system’s network will work out.”

“Yes, the solar system net is still active. By the way, are you going out somewhere?”

“Yep, I’m going off to the massage... wait, what?”

Tarou slowly turned around at the voice that came from behind. Therein was the form of Maar and Koume looking at him with innocent eyes.

“There was something I wanted to talk about, but if you’re busy it can wait. By the way, I don’t really mind if you turn this way, but you’ll just embarrass yourself with that sm—”

“Lalala, I can’t hear anything, I can’t hear anything!!”

Still naked, Tarou touched his hands to his ears. Her shoulders cramped up, Maar pulled out a set of underwear from the closet. After handing Tarou some vibrant undergarments, she leaned back into a large sofa in the center of the room.

“Why does she know where I keep my underwear, Koume-san?”

Turning away his lower half, Tarou turned only his torso towards Koume. She tilted her head.

“Unknown, Mister Teirow. But I understand Miss Maar’s intent. She likely wishes to hide away something unsightly. Specifically speaking, your sma—”

“Lalala!! Whoever made you really was messed up!!”

After Tarou equipped his underwear, he sat on the spot with a slightly reddened face. He got the feeling he heard a, “I feel sick,” line from Maar, but he decided to ignore it.

“Maar-tan, I think it’s over for you if you lose a maiden’s bashfulness.”

“I agree wholeheartedly, but are you talking about me? There’s a difference

between looking and showing.”

“I can’t even argue with that!!... Anyways, let’s put that aside. Did you need something? I’m bored as can be, so... ah, let me get you some tea.”

Tarou wondered why he was speaking so politely as he handled one of the few devices he knew how to use. To put it simply, he poured enough cups of water into an electric pot.

“Oh, that’s a nice smell. So you drink tea... I do apologize for saying it, but that’s a surprise. What maker’s it from?”

Maar took the ceramic cup, narrowing her eyes at the smell. Koume gazed at her own cup with intrigue, pretending to take in the scent like Maar. She didn’t require the slightest amount of fluid intake, but leaving her emptyhanded would be like leaving her out, or so Tarou thought.

“The maker... I don’t really know. The old man from our last delivery... no, old man is rude. Our last client, that president said it was a local specialty and offered it. I think it was Baku Station?”

On Tarou’s words, Maar’s cup-holding hand came to a stop.

“Baku greens... you mean this is real tea? It’s not synthetic?”

On the eyes glaring at him, “Y-yeah,” Tarou stuttered.

“Hah... whatever. Be careful out there. You don’t want them thinking you’ve come into a fortune. I’m pretty sure this costs close to 200crd a cup.”

Nodding at Maar’s identification, Tarou carried out the general calculations in his head. As the value of goods was much different than the earth he knew, he couldn’t do simple ratios... metal and industrial goods were shockingly cheap... but in everyday life, 1 credit was generally one dollar. In what daily necessities it could provide, he considered it somewhere around 100 yen.

“... I see, so it’s twenty thousand yen a cup... now that you’ve made me conscious of it, you know. I can’t even taste it anymore. By the way, what did you want to talk about?”

“It does feels like a bit of a waste to drink Baku tea leaves... umm, right. About that money from before. I was wondering if you thought over how you were

going to use it.”

“Oh, the 300 million in question? What I’ll do with it? I was thinking to buy a ship for the company or something.”

Is that it? Tarou said it lightly. Maar sent him a conflicted expression, “But,” she continued on.

“It’s not like all of it was company income. A portion of it should be treated as your own earnings, right?”

On Maar’s words, Tarou shook his head.

“Honestly, I can live just fine on my president wages, so gettin’ some extra pocket money doesn’t really excite me. On earth, I would honestly pray to god for enough money to play around the rest of my life, but I guess people change in changin’ times. Right now, I think I’d get the most fun from watchin’ the company grow.”

Tarou looked out into the distance as he made a smile. While it’s true the words contained some modesty, they were also Tarou’s honest-to-goodness feelings. In whatever form it may be, he felt a wondrous sense of fulfillment when he was useful to others. Maar seemed somewhat impressed.

“Hmm... well that’s fine. So what are you going to do? Even if you say ship, there are various kinds. Are you getting another warship?”

On Maar’s query, Tarou stuck up his thumb.

“Rightio. I think I’ll buy a cruiser this time.”

A silence passed through that not-so-narrow room. Maar seemed to want to say something as she opened and closed her mouth, but she eventually breathed a sigh of resignation.

“I see. Well, since it’s you, I’m sure you have something in mind, so that’s fine. If it’s a cruiser, I think it’ll take around 200 million... hey, Teirow. I have a proposal on how to use the remaining hundred million.”

Sticking up her index finger, Maar drew her face closer. Somewhat nervous, Tarou sent a level reply of, “What?”

“Do you want to try getting into commerce? Not just transporting goods,

actually buying and selling them. We... no, it's more you, but we do have some expert knowledge here. I don't think there's anything lost in making use of it."

On Maar's indirect phrasing, Tarou wondered what was up. Eventually hitting on what she wanted to say, he returned a satisfied nod.

"I see. Munitions, eh?"

Chapter 29

The military knowledge gained at the imperial military academy. While it was information open to the general public over the neuralnet, whether you could grasp it or not was a separate issue.

For example, the optical weapon entry. In order to understand its essence, you would need a basis in other fields, and the required knowledge covered a shockingly wide ground. The knowledge those aiming to be military elites spent long years to learn weren't particularly useful in daily life, so there were few who cared enough to learn.

But as Koume had flooded all the relevant information into Tarou, all that miscellaneous information definitely did exist in the boy's head.

"If it's munitions, I definitely do have the knowledge, but commerce... sounds like it'll increase our level of self-responsibility, but it'll probably have just as high rewards."

Tarou nodded a few times. Carefully holding her cup, "Right," Maa went on.

"The money you get from transport is only a portion of what you can obtain through trade. It's fine if you want to keep at transport, but as long as we fly a warship, our cargo capacity has its limits. There's a high probability we'll eventually cap out our earnings."

"Sure enough," said Tarou. There, Koume quietly spoke.

"Miss Maar's concerns are sound. The ratio of Rising Sun Corp's proceeds and sundry expenses worsens with the addition of new vessels. It is self-evident that our investment efficiency will decrease with greater numbers."

"Thank you for the tedious stuff as always, Koume-chan. But, well, you're right. This is how far we've gotten on the advantages of delivering to dangerous regions, but it's right about time the large companies will start sticking their hands in."

"Oh? That's the first I'm hearing of it," said Maar. "Look," Tarou forwarded a

mail through BISHOP.

“Umm, I see. An invitation to take part in a transport fleet... wait, what? What’s this? Their side barely has any battleships setting out. Are they trying to make inadvertent guards of us?”

“I thought so to. Being how it is, I refused the job, but there are quite a few of these talks going down. Perhaps danger zone transport is even more appealing than we had imagined.”

“In that case, it is certain the profits will diminish, Mister Teirow. Ah, speaking of diminishing, Mister Teirow, your sm—”

“Ah~, yeah, yeah!! You’re sure draggin’ that out, Koume-saan!! What’s wrong with you? Did you learn something strange? Hah... we’ve been transporting too many peculiar things.”

As Tarou recalled the adult toys that constituted the bulk of his transports, he let out a powerless sigh.

“But since it’s come to it, our prospects are looking bleak. We’ll need to take some measures... You don’t need to make a decision on that commerce talk here and now, but just think over it as a single option.”

“Got it... yes, Koume-san, you didn’t have to react to the words, ‘prospects looking bleak,’ you know? In the distant past, and even now, I’ve never got the chance to test its bleakness. Though saying it does make me want to die... ah, right, Maar. While we’re at it, let’s get Allan in on this conversation, and work out some details.”

In regards to Teirow, Maar sent a voice of approval as she concentrated on the display atop the table. After calling Allan through BISHOP, it took mere seconds before his face was projected.

“Uwah!! So that table was a holo-display? That’s a surprise... but why is it just the head? Isn’t it usually the whole body?”

A special mist was sprayed out of the display. Colored onto that with lasers, Allan’s head appeared above the table with such realness you might mistake it for the genuine article.

“Oy, oy, I don’t know what’s going on, but it seems I’m in quite a state on your side. More importantly, what did you need? I was just about to go to the masa... er, I mean I was off to the park.”

On the question from the severed head, “Yeah, hear me out, brother,” Tarou explained with heartfelt conviction.

“I see, trade... That doesn’t sound bad.”

With the display still cut at his neck, Allan rubbed his chin with his hand as he spoke. Outside of its scope, his wrist was cut at a cross-section making it look as if it were floating in thin air.

“With a hundred million credit to start out, is there any promising merchandise we can stock?”

“Hmm. It’s not like there’s nothing, but if you’re using that money, you’d better limit it to half. In the case an accident causes you to lose your cargo, we’ll go bankrupt before you know it.”

“Yeah~, sure enough. Then fifty million?”

“Why are you at full throttle from the start, Admiral... just because you’re proficient in military affairs, that doesn’t mean you’ll be any good at trade. Try running it as an offshoot of the transport, and see how things go. Why not use around ten million to test the waters?”

“Erk, you have a point... so what do you recommend using it on? Personally, I think warp stabilizers’ll be nice.”

“Oh? And why’s that? I was sure you’d say gunpowder or turrets.”

“Why? I mean, the WIND, the WIND. There’s nothing bad about taking them out, but most ships would have to run if they encountered them, right? Unlike flesh and blood humans, those things can accelerate as violently as they want, so in that case, there’s no choice but to rely on warp.”

“Hmm,” Allan hummed a note. Maar sent him a sidelong glance before sticking her index finger up towards Tarou.

“In other words, you think the enemy will keep this chaos up for a while longer?”

Tarou gazed at Maar's finger.

"No, I mean no matter how you look at it, that's how it's going down. Rather, won't things only get worse from here?"

Some inquisitive looks came in from the two humans. "Mister Teirow," Koume stepped in.

"If possible, could you elaborate on the reason behind your thoughts? At present, Koume cannot see enough information to arrive at such a conclusion."

"No, no, no, it's in plain sight. The stargate, think of the stargate. The stargate to Adela was totally sealed off, right? Isn't that strange? And the empire's fleet was stationed there immobile."

On Tarou's point, Maar swallowed her breath. There, "I see," Allan said, and continued on.

"At the very least, the imperial navy doesn't have any intent to take an aggressive stance against the WIND. They looked through our ship's records, and their detachment definitely had a landing force. If they wanted to, they could've gotten the station back long ago."

"But then why? Even if it was a rural station, if you look at its monetary value, it should at least be worth a small fleet."

"I can't really answer the why... but they must have some sort of reason. Reason, reason. What could it be."

Tarou, Maar, and Allan started in thinking to themselves. After a while of that, Koume quietly spoke.

"Could the cause not be the neural network?"

Three gazes gathered on her spherical, mechanical eyes.

"Umm, doesn't that make this really, really bad?"

"You mean the military's lines are dead? I won't say that's impossible, but that would mean the very foundation of the neuralnet is down.""

"If the neuralnet really is dead... what'll happen?"

"Mister Teirow. Unlike the neuralnet, the solarnets cannot reach any further

than a few lightyears. Therefore, the loss of the neuralnet will create spaces completely cut off from the flow of information. As I recall, there was a network map. Would you like to take a look?”

On Koume’s voice, the three promptly started up BISHOP. Numerous fixed stars on that three dimensional display were connected with white lines, creating what looked like a complex molecular structure. Only their present location Delta, and the surrounding areas were shown, but even so, the stars numbered a few thousand.

“Hey, Koume. Can you calculate back from the solarnet distance or something, and identify which areas will be isolated? If we play it right, won’t this become an exceptionally valuable map?”

Turning to Maar, Koume turned her mechanical head left and right.

“I apologize, Miss Maar. With just a portion, it might be possible given the time, but as a whole there are much too many factors to—”

“Done.”

Tarou interrupted. Thinking she had misheard something, Koume tilted her head. After a while, Allan likely confirmed his BISHOP as he said, “You’re kidding, right?”

“Just how much combination computing would you need for that... I don’t know what it’s in, but you’re a gift holder, aren’t you, Admiral. I haven’t been this surprised in a long while... but this is enough of a surprise to overwrite that.”

“Yes... and a hopeless surprise at that.”

The three looked at the galaxy’s network map on their BISHOPs. As Tarou had painted areas that would remain connected in a different color, it had become a complex, speckled pattern, as if a maddened painter had slammed their art tools against the canvas.

“Koume has also tried recalculating some points, but surprisingly enough, this is a truly accurate map, it seems. Of the 4096 points randomly selected, all of them have calculated to the correct value.”

“I see... hey, Admiral. I think I know what that military detachment was trying to do.”

“Yeah. I’ve got an inkling myself. To put it simply, it’s that.”

Between spaces of blue and yellow, Tarou traced his finger along a black empty space of BISHOP. The Adela System and its stargate were undoubtedly stationed on the very boundary of the transmission zone.

“They were patrolling their new border.”

Chapter 30

“Whoah... it’s huge...”

Pulled in by four towing ships, the new model cruiser’s 720 meter bulk gently settled on the large-scale dock.

Named the Plum II, it was installed with the ghost ship’s core just like the Destroyer Plum before it, the additional armoring around the engine recycling its Black Metal IN. But that was the only common point they shared, with its appearance and contents incomparable to before. When a ship’s span doubled, a simple calculation would give it 8 times the capacity.

“The last Plum was a good ship, but this is amazin’. With this bad boy, we might even be able to do some digging.”

In the gravity room of the dock, Tarou pushed his face up against the window glass. To his side, “You’re exaggerating,” Maar said as like Tarou— and like Allan who was further back in the room— she peered out onto the dock.

While the old Plum had a shape like that of a box with the corners smoothed down, this one had no such shred of soft smoothness: it boasted a complete straight-line design. Its shape was as if the Tokyo metropolitan governmental building was made to taper off and flipped on its side, with four turret bays lining each face, up, down, left, and right. The individual gun turrets didn’t differ much from those of the old Plum, but the four fold increase in firepower was a large one.

“I think they called it a complete coverage model. If you stick out all the turrets, it seems you’ll look like a hedgehog. Looks aside, it does look reliable.”

Maar quietly muttered. To that, “Naïve,” Tarou went on.

“Of our 16 bays, 8 are beam weapons. 6 are railguns, and the remaining two are torpedo tubes!!”

How about that? Tarou’s face seemed to say. Maar and Allan sent him blank looks.

“By railgun, you mean that? Projectile ballistic weaponry?”

In regards to Allan’s question, “You betcha!!” Tarou replied in high spirits. Allan held his temple in his hands as, “What are you even...” he said.

“Flying projectiles went out of date more than a thousand years ago. Of course, we learn about them in military academy as a part of history, but what exactly do you plan to do, loading up with those antiques?”

“Huh? Ballistic weaponry isn’t used anymore?”

“I’m an amateur in warfare, and even I can declare they’re not... hah. And what’s this ‘torpedo’ thing? I haven’t even heard of it. Is it an earth weapon?”

The two of them displayed fed-up faces. Tarou answered them, somewhat awkwardly.

“No, look. All ships out there, WIND included, see. Even if they have shields, they’re all beam shields these days. I’ve never even heard of a ship that put much effort into its physical shields, so I just thought it might be a good idea. By the way, torpedoes are these huge missile things. Since we’re not at sea, I’m not sure if I should be callin’ them torpedoes in the first place, though.”

Tarou threw in all sorts of gestures as he explained torpedoes. Perhaps he was able to convey some form of understanding, as the two of them breathed out sighs.

“I was wondering what you used tens of millions of credits to order, but it was something like that? How should I say it, to this point, we’ve been able to make it without issue, but come this far, I’m really starting to feel the difference in our times is taking a bad turn.”

To Maar’s words, “Agreed,” said Allan.

“I’m sure you have your own thoughts on the matter, admiral, so I’ll withhold my comments. But, well. Using company money on your personal hobbies is a bit hard to swallow.”

Receiving two rejections, “Urggh,” Tarou was lost for words.

“I-it’ll be fine, I tells ‘ya. It’s not as if we just searched up some old blueprints and used them as is. I’m sure they’ll be useful... somewhere... right...”

As his words faded away, the two sent eyes of pity.

“Well, let’s just put that aside for now. It’s not like fighting’s our main business, and 8 lasers is more than enough.”

A dubious air still lingering between the three, they set out to board the Plum II.

“Wow, incredible. These joing shock absorbers are the latest model. How bouncy.”

Maar made merry in her command room seat. In structure, the central command room hadn’t changed from before. But the equipment had been remodeled, Tarou had even done some personal modifications based on his lessons in combat.

“I had all the displays made of a soft material. They may warp a bit on impact, but you won’t hurt your forehead bangin’ up against them.”

The displays extending from the arms of the seat. Tarou spoke as he played with its rubber-like material.

“So you got the warp stabilizer package under additional options. About how much power can it put out?”

“Hmm, I don’t know the specifics, but accordin’ to Koume’s calculations, with the jammers those small WIND were using, we’d be fine even if ten of them tried jamming us at once.”

“Ten? Now that’s amazing. It’s not like all our enemies will have jammers, so it doesn’t look like we’ll be tied down so easily. What other appliances do we have?”

“I’m sure you could tell from looking at the outside, but we’ve got a humongous scanner on board. I prioritized resolution over distance, so that baby can project a beauty’s bust from 300km away.”

The footage on the display of the ship’s exterior showed the diamond-shaped scanner in all its glory. Extending left and right almost like a pair of wings, from the point of view of an earthling like Tarou, it looked like a giant solar panel.

“Our medical facilities to the residential area are worlds away from what we

‘ad before. More than 100 medical capsules, and 10 blocks of module living quarters. Even if we ‘ad 2000 people, they’d be able to live with ease, don’t you think?”

“When you get to cruiser size, you really do get some freedoms. At this size, will those up top treat it as an official battleship?”

“Sure they will. Everything destroyer and bellow’s treated as a, ‘small-scale military craft’. With this ship, we’re finally bein’ counted as part of the empire’s fighting power. On top of bein’ nothin’ but conspicuous, the amount of paperwork I had to fill out was no joke. No wonder there are people who hate registering with the empire.”

Tarou gave a bitter smiled as he recalled the numerous days of grasping regulations and signing forms under the guidance of experts. He had written ‘transport and trade’ as the purpose of his purchase, and there was a bit of a quarrel over whether to pass it or not. In the peaceful empire, there weren’t any people who used warships in their general business, and registering something besides a cargo ship was unprecedented.

“I shoulda just bought a dummy cargo ship. Then I could’ve called this one a guard ship and been done with it... aah, I also equipped a beam jammer and scan scrambler. But since I don’t plan on chasing a fleeing enemy, I didn’t go for the warp jammer.”

On Tarou’s words, Maar showed a satisfied nod. “Just leave that sort of thing to the security companies,” she said, as she began fiddling around with the scanner and engine that would become her primary charges.

“So there are two nuclear fusion chambers... with independent circuits... is it a safety measure? If I merged them somewhere... can I just get them both under this control program...”

As if playing with a new world, she mumbled herself off into her own world. Tarou knew she was beyond reach when she got like this, she he decided to leave her alone for a while.

“This is the central control room. Allan, how are things on your side?”

Tarou touched the downsized listening device to his ear. The word ‘Allan’

floated up on his BISHOP, the shape of the soundwave displayed as his voice came across.

“Ain’t just great, it’s the best. It feels strange to be able to park a ship in another ship. I see two other ships apart from the stardust, but are they for recon?”

“Right, right. Those are recon ships equipped with an assisted scan, and while they’re unsuited to battle, they have some nice reviews. Apparently they can also move unmanned, but if you do that, you have to look out for jamming, they say. Apparently there was a court case where one was taken over.”

“The 4428 incident? That wasn’t an actual takeover, but... well, it should be fine. I don’t mind if you leave this area to me. Even if I look like this, I’m a former imperial soldier.”

After returning an, “Okay!” to Allan’s satisfied voice, Tarou checked the clock on his BISHOP. It was almost time, he lifted his face. Just as he did, the door to the command room slid open.

The one who entered the open doorway was a black-haired woman of blooming age. While her body would certainly be mistaken as human at first glance, there were some connection inputs running down her organic skin coating clearly indicating she was a cyborg.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Mister Teirow. I am unaccustomed to dealing with organic material, but do you think it suits me?”

Dropping her gaze to her own arm, Koume showed a curious expression.

“Y-yeah... you look great. When you’re like that, you’re practically human... more importantly...”

Tarou took a step forwards, and then another. The body he had once presented her had a face covered in outer skin, and by it, she should have attained the feature he wanted most.

“Hey, Koume, could you smile for me?”

Koume tilted her head with a blank expression. As if suddenly struck by something, she raised her gaze, and presented Tarou the most splendid of smiles.

Chapter 31

“Yes, then I will send the contract papers to BISHOP. Aah, no, of course, I do understand. After the next stocking, I will bring it close. Yes, yes. Ah, yes, the everyday commodities? Ahh, we don’t have a transport ship, so it will be an issue in terms of space... ah, no. Of course, we will do as much as we can.”

At Plum II’s display room, Tarou was talking and continuously kept bowing his head. In the monitor, the client company’s boss was projected and he had a satisfied expression. After awhile, when the two talking over the monitor put two of their fingers on their foreheads, and the connection was cut.

“Whew. Well, that was kinda anticlimactic. I didn’t think we would be able to sell everything at the first station we dropped by. Just as the empire’s announcement, it’s quite something here.”

Said Tarou while changing the monitor display to the network map. Two months after making use of Plum II, the maps hue changed completely from before.

“It’s been a whole 800 years since the state of emergency two was announced. But even the empire, which I thought was indifferent towards it, does what it needs to, huh? I didn’t think they would reduce the damage like that.”

Maar said while looking at the monitor, putting a finger on her lips. Tarou replied, ‘right?’ to that and thought back on the empire’s actions. Information was cut off due to the severance of the fractal network, which was supposed to be all around the empire. It was primitive but they dealt with the situation really fast and effectively.

“Even if they think up a plan like sending a ton of relay ships to places where the signal does not reach, normally one wouldn’t go through with that plan. What was it, 3 million communication warships scattered around the milky way? What happened to that?”

“It is 2,885,232 ships to be exact, Mr. Teirow. It seems all the ships, even the

ones preparing and the ones on the verge of destruction, were ordered forward by the emperor.”

“That was a brave decision. I learned in a lesson, and didn’t experience it first hand, but the imperial government is really strong in crisis management, aren’t they? If it was a parliament, at most they would now be opening a countermeasure meeting.”

On the network map the three were looking at, the center part of the empire was blue. The communication ships the empire deployed were acting like utility poles, connecting about 5% of the entire Milky Way. Even the remaining areas were changing to get tinted at one place, rather than on various different places like before.

“But I was the most surprised about that. That thing about calling the Solar System Net–Neural Net. This means that the empire does not plan on restoring the previous neural network, right? I wonder what happened.”

In response to Tarou’s question, Maar folded hands and groaned.

“Yep, it does make me curious but I don’t think they will make an official announcement. After all, this crisis could be said to be the largest one since the empire was established. If there is an announcement, then it will probably be when the new neural network rises to the previous one’s level, I think?”

“The chances of that are pretty high but I do think it is somewhat impossible too, Miss Maar. Even if the communication ships are connected by relay, they would not be covering as much area as the Adera star system. Moreover, the data which can be stored is also one fraction of a several hundred compared to before.”

“They could probably do something about that with new techniques or discoveries.”

Tarou was thinking about the technical aspects of the faster-than-light speed but as he wouldn’t understand it either way, he shook off the thought.

“Let’s leave the difficult part to the specialists.... By the way, Maar-tan, what do we do about that thing behind us? Shall we use some jamming?”

Maar said ‘Let it be.’ to Tarou who had been annoyed.

“And besides, jammer isn’t even loaded. It’s not like it’s bothering us or violating any rules... How about requesting the Mafian Cope?”

The two were talking about the various transport ships floating about a few kilometers behind Plum II. It seemed like they were counting on Plum II’s fighting strength. They have been maintaining a distance ever since departing from delta.

“But it sure is annoying. What are you guys, stalkers? They are probably thinking something like ‘Ah, I can’t help but be entranced by the Plum II’s Quadra Pulse Engine’. Such perverts.”

“Oh but Plum’s engine is actually very irresistibly pretty, you know? If possible, I want to lick it all over. I will die from poisoning if I actually do it, though.”

“Uwaah, there was a pervert here too... By the way, what is this Mafian Cope you were talking about earlier? Something like the yakuza where scary people gather?”

“So rude. Umm, I don’t quite understand what you mean by yakuza but you are right about scary people gathering there. They are the people doing business at every station’s grey zones.”

“.....Wow. They are as one would say temporary business personnel who would have tattoos all over their body, aren’t they? At a time like this, what would those people do?”

Tarou asked out of pure curiosity. To that, Koume cut into the conversation, ‘Please wait a moment.’

“I found some similar cases in the past, Mr. Teirow. First, they will intentionally decrease the scan resolution and will bring forth a disorder in the communication device’s output control so that long distance warnings do not reach. After emitting the unreachable warnings multiple times, they will go towards the debris near the enemy and practice fire. That’s the usual method. If the precision is low, there is plenty of chance for accidental shooting to hit the enemy and if they don’t find out using the scanning tactics, it does not go against any of the empire’s rules. Was that helpful?”

Koume finished saying and smiled. Even though Tarou and Maar were happy, Koume was now able to have expressions, they could not help but stiffly smile back.

——“Emergency Signal Alan”——

There on the monitor, a communication signal popped up suddenly. After signalling the others to be silent with his hand, Tarou connected the communication circuit.

“This is Plum. I got your emergency signal. Alan, go ahead.”

“Yoo, general. I have good news. I ended up opening an emergency circuit but forgive me for it. Is now a good time?”

Hearing Alan’s cheerful voice, Tarou calmed his heart down. Then he switched the sound source from only him to the room speaker and Alan’s voice resounded within the room.

“Mankind’s sole planet origin theory. Do you remember it? We found out the location of the great scholar who proposed it. He’s a big one.”

Upon hearing the news, Tarou ended up standing on his seat reflexively.

“Re-really?! Where is it?! I will go anywhere! Right now! Can I go right now?!”

“Calm down, general. It seems the professor is in a research station in the Alpha star system. I got the info from a man helping there. I think we can trust him. The man started working there about a year ago but it seems that the professor has been there for several decades already. He probably won’t move somewhere else at this point.”

“Where was the Alpha station again?..... Uwah, not only is it really far, it’s also outside the communication range.... Are we really going there?”

Displaying the empire’s map on the monitor, asked Maar. She probably searched with BISHOP. To that, Tarou instantly replied, ‘Of course we will.’

“We have just ran out of cargo, so let’s go back to delta and fill up before we head there. Uwaah, now I am getting excited. Since he’s a professor, I wonder if he has a big nose and shaggy hair,”

“Like I said before, you read too much manga, Mister Teirow. Or is it the case

that Earth's professors' appearances were generally like that?"

"Hahaha, you're right about the shaggy hair part but his nose is pretty normal. I have a picture, let me send it to you."

After awhile, a color picture was delivered to us through BISHOP. It was a time when the professor had attended a ceremony or something, holding a trophy with a smile.

"Dr. Isaac Aldimof, 72 years old, eh? Is the fact that he looks like 40 because of the anti-aging thing or something?"

The picture of the professor smiling looked like a man still in his prime.

"Probably that. The medical cosmetics company do say that they can hold back 50% of the aging effects of the body. But I wonder what it feels like being old but looking young..."

"Let's hear it from Koume-san, who will not lose to anyone in terms of that."

"Yes, Mr. Teirow. Miss Maar, men are often weak to this difference. I am sure Mr. Teirow is no exception either."

"I did not ask you that and I am not even interested."

After a little stretching, Maar stood up and continued,

"But, with this, we have a destination, so all that's left is shopping. Let's undertake some transportation with the free space we have and fill it all in. It's time to earn!"

In response to Maar's lively announcement, Tarou also replied with enthusiasm, 'Yess!'.

"Let's say we let the executive manager handle the company while we are away, what will we be loading? Since it's a research station, how about a new generation of calculating computer?"

"No, they are weak to shockwaves so unless we get a direct order, we should avoid that. Better than that, we should get a lot of small size warp stabilizers. We know for sure that they will certainly sell."

"Koume also agrees with Miss Maar. I think getting definite profit is better

than risking it.”

“Hey, general. Don’t forget to stock up on some adult goods too. It is still the biggest earner in our company still. And also, if you are planning to do business at the Alpha station, you should make a base there as well. You would definitely need on-site staff.”

Thinking about the new land, the 4 talked of every necessities. The top-level conference on Plum II for the Rising Sun Corp continued till Tarou ended up collapsing there.